

John 3:1-15

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[0 : 0 0] is John chapter 3 verses 1 through 15. It's on page 983 of the White Church Bibles if you've got them. That is John chapter 3 verses 1 through 15.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.

Jesus answered him, truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus said to him, how can a man be born when he is old?

Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Jesus answered, truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born again. The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

[1 : 1 9] So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit. Nicodemus said to him, how can these things be? And Jesus answered him, are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and we bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things, and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

No one has ascended into heaven, except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

This is the word of the Lord. Please be seated. What is the role of religion when it comes to your ability to secure or maintain a relationship to God?

Certainly that question is in play in the broader culture in which we live. There is much being said about religious liberties, and of consequence, the place of religion not only in private life but public life, and the role of religion in securing and maintaining your relationship to God.

[3 : 1 0] Os Guinness is a quasi-philosopher, mainly known for his Christian sociological analysis of culture and the Christian message, and he highlights three contemporary answers or pathways on that question.

Religion and your relationship to God. One, he says people are beginning to think that religion should be reduced in its importance.

By that, he really means that you're free to worship God or relate to God through whatever religious means you see necessary, as long as that is reduced to your personal or private world.

Answer the question the way you want to answer it. Just don't require that your answer be somehow identified in the public domain.

He gives another R. Redefining. Not everyone would just reduce the question to one's private beliefs, but they would redefine the role of religion in our relationship to God.

[4 : 3 6] And this is happening in the church and without. Historic, traditional, Protestant beliefs are continually being redefined in ways that may accommodate a non-traditional perspective on the place of religion and relationship to God.

Of course, you don't have to be a believer to redefine the question. The world will do this as well.

Constantly redefining what belief is or religion is for those, even if they don't hold it.

Reduce it. Redefine it. Another expression today is simply to, in a sense, remove it.

Lenin's line about longing for the day when the world loses religion because religionists are responsible for much of the oppression and wickedness in the world.

What's the role of religion and your relationship to God? Many would say, let's remove it entirely. Jesus has his own R, not to reduce it merely to a private sphere or redefine it in its elements or remove it, but as you're going to see in the conversation with Nicodemus, who was the consummate religionist, he's going to use something called replacement.

[6 : 27] Religion is replaced with something in regard to how we relate to God. I'm getting ahead of myself a little bit, but if you've been tracking with the series this summer, you can see that this replacement motif is part of the gospel that we've already been looking at.

I know a number of you are carrying around the John Bibles and open notes, and you're beginning to see as you look back week by week that John wants you to know that many things are replaced by this new gospel message.

Creation itself is framed within a new creation. Beyond that, we've seen how the wedding at Cana, how one was purified in the old world through water jars, is replaced with this messianic arrival of the kingdom.

You've seen how the sacrificial system last week is replaced with his own body, and this week, religion as commonly understood is going to be replaced with something else.

Wouldn't you love to have a conversation with Jesus on religion? Nicodemus had it. And the way John describes him at the outset in verse 1 is striking.

[7 : 58] Two descriptive phrases that open up a window into his person. He describes him as a man of the Pharisees, verse 1, and a ruler of the Jews.

In other words, the writer of this gospel wants you to know that he is putting a person before you who had a conversation with Jesus, and this man is an authentic follower of Judaism and religion. He had a place for the value of religion. It lists him as a Pharisee, which is simply a way of saying, in one sense, by way of shorthand, this man was devoted to the Hebrew Bible.

Pharisees were people of the book. They were religionists. They were earnest. They lived by the golden rule. They treated others as they would want to be treated.

And so you're seeing a morally upright and religiously inclined person. But he's also described as a ruler of the Jews.

[9 : 18] That's, for all intentions, a more technical phrase than just an ardent follower of a religion. A ruler of the Jews implies that he was a member of a body of 70, which would have been called the Sanhedrin.

And this governing body was responsible for the authentic life of Judaism within a hostile and unbelieving world.

So they were the private religion bearers to ensure that there was proper worship in a public setting. They would have had responsibility over the temple and over the way in which people exercised within Judaism their freedom of religion.

They would have lobbied for the ability of religious Jews to continue relating to God as their book required.

So here he is. He's a ruler of the people. A ruler of their faith. He's an advocate for religious freedom. He's a pastor and a protector of God's people.

[10 : 35] Which means he's confident that he has a relationship with God. That God has a relationship with him. Simply put, his religion and his relationship to God were inseparable.

That's what makes the conversation so fascinating. He was confident on how to answer the question.

What does religion have to do to secure my relationship to God? So, with a bit of imagination, you can almost envision meeting him.

I would imagine if he walked down the streets of 57th, there would be many who would ask him, Nicodemus, do you really still hold that religion ought to be so critical in securing and maintaining a relationship to God?

I mean, welcome to the 21st century where we are all aware of the horrific crimes committed against humanity in the name of religion.

[11 : 44] And Nicodemus would have said, of course, all of those are horrifying and need to be repented of. But he would have been convinced in conversation with you that the world was a better place for religion, not just religion of an evil intent, which we're so familiar with today.

In fact, if you want to know how confident he was, take a look at the next verse. He comes to Jesus by night. Rabbi, we know that you're a teacher from God. No one can do these signs that you do

unless God is with him.

I mean, if you wanted to know about his confidence, look at the we know. We know. He's not coming to Jesus by night going, hey, I've got a few questions about God and I'm looking for your help because I hear you're a wonderful itinerant evangelist.

No, he's coming to instruct the young Jesus about some things of which he knows, we know. This is the imperial we.

This is the academic we. This is a man who is convinced that he knows something about God and that he can assess Jesus properly.

[13:08] That's how confident he was. Which really then makes the fireworks of the dialogue begin at verse 3. Jesus answered him.

You could almost imagine this young, ruddy, itinerant, unschooled street preacher looking into the eyes of this seasoned leader and uttering these words, truly, truly, I say to you, which he's going to utter again, which is this formulaic way of saying, you think you know a thing or two, listen to me because I've got something that you need to get a hold of.

In other words, truly, truly, I say to you, is an indication that Jesus was kind of offended that Nicodemus thought he had the upper hand on religion and relationship to God.

In fact, he says, this is what I want you to know. Oh, you person who's confident that your religion and your relationship with God are in good order. Unless you are born again, you can't even see that kingdom of God, let alone enter it.

Now this must have rocked Nicodemus a bit. Probably the first time in decades he had gone into class and started out as the instructor and felt he was now on his heels.

[14:48] Somebody was questioning his assumption that his understanding of religion put him in right relationship to God. And so he says, how can a man be born when he's old?

Can he enter into his mother's womb and be born? I can't quite hear it completely, but there's almost an element in my mind, at least by way of potential interpretation, that the second question is a bit cynical, is a bit sarcastic.

Like, what are you talking about? You don't get born two times? I think he was confused.

His confidence had been shaken. And Jesus, he doesn't let up. I mean, having gotten his way in, look at verse 5.

Truly, truly, I say to you, there it is again. Listen up, oh person who's confident that your religion puts you into relationship with God.

[15:57] Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Do you see the way those two statements of Jesus now sit like anchors plummeting to the bottom of Nicodemus' soul?

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you're born again, you cannot see the kingdom of God. Now truly, truly, I say to you, unless you're born of water, and Spirit, you cannot enter the kingdom of God. And then he goes on and says, that which is born of flesh is flesh. That which is born of Spirit is Spirit. In other words, I'm not talking about being born again a second time into your mother's womb by flesh.

I'm talking about the difference between a physical birth and a spiritual birth. He says, you must be born again.

And then this ambiguous metaphor, like a breeze across Nicodemus' person, the wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

[17:12] So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. And Nicodemus said, how can these things be? What's going on?

What's going on with Jesus' words about water? Do you see it there? In verse 5, spirit.

Spirit multiple times. And then wind. Water, spirit, wind. How is this a help to Nicodemus in a state of confusion?

I think Jesus is actually connecting with him here, although we don't see it as clearly. We're too far removed. Remember, Nicodemus was a scholar of the book.

In other words, he taught the Old Testament in a sense for a living. He's a div school faculty member. There's a moment in Ezekiel's prophecy, you might want to turn back, Ezekiel 37, that I think captures what Jesus is doing here.

[18:39] He's alluding to common text that he thinks Nicodemus will have at the forefront of his mind to help Nicodemus see the nature of this being born again.

In Ezekiel 37, it's probably the most famous of Ezekiel's visions. It's this vision of dry bones, an entire valley, not of an army standing and filled with life, not even of an army that has fallen and is dead on the battlefield.

What he shows him is a valley where it's like dead. We're all the way to the point of bones.

Oscar Leyva once said something like, you can't be dead than dead. Well, if there is a way to be deader than dead, this valley of dry bones is it.

You're looking over a field of what was life a long time ago and it's completely dead. And in Ezekiel 37, I want you to see a couple of things.

[20 : 06] You have this metaphor of water, spirit, and wind repeated. Chapter 36, verse 25, the prophecy is, I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness.

In other words, the spiritual cleansing of water. Or, verse 26, I will give you a new heart and a new spirit. This whole emphasis on this valley that comes in verse chapter 37 is on water and spirit.

And then when he enters into that valley, chapter 37, verse 5, thus says the Lord God to these bones, behold, I will cause breath to enter into you.

Literally wind. So, what Jesus is doing to Nicodemus' question, how is someone going to be born a second time, he's saying, well, Nicodemus, Ezekiel 36 and 37 is how.

This is material you've taught. God is going to renew a dead people and make them alive by a spiritual rebirth.

[21 : 22] And so, he's rolling this out to Nicodemus, and this is why it is so stunning, verse 9, that Nicodemus says, how can these things be?

And at that point, Jesus, the young itinerant evangelist in a small home in the midst of the Levant, must have been looking across the table, and all of his wide-eyed expectation that he is going to have a wonderful conversation with the teacher of the law on the law, is plummeted.

It's like a teacher looking into the eye of a student and seeing deer in the midst of headlights. That's the way Jesus felt. And you know that because he almost throws up his hands in exasperation, verse 10.

The interpretive force is now clear. Jesus answered him, are you a teacher of Israel and you don't get these things? And notice now for the third time, truly, truly, I say to you, it's almost now castigating Nicodemus.

Nicodemus, for the third time, let me teach you something you need to know. We speak of what we know. Oh, what a wonderful phrase.

[22 : 39] Jesus now has picked up the first person plural himself. Nicodemus came in at night saying, we know a few things. I can tell you about your work.

But now Jesus is saying, listen, I've talked to you long enough tonight. We know a few things on our own too. And turning around, there's nobody else in the room. In other words, he is matched.

We for we. In one sense, he's beginning to replace you for me. What does Jesus know about relationship and religion and how it would help Nicodemus or you secure and maintain a relationship with God.

Jesus says, we speak of what we know, we bear witness to what we've seen, but you don't receive it. You're not hearing me. You're listening to my preaching, but I have no witness.

It's like a pastor who stood in the pulpit and go, you're making me work too hard today. I thought somebody would be with me on this today. See, Jesus is saying here.

[23 : 58] And then he says, look, how are you going to get on to this when I'm just talking to you about basic elementary grammar things, grammar, logic, rhetoric? I've returned all the way to grammar.

Text from Ezekiel, clear teaching, you're not getting it. And then he says, verse 13, almost like a stunning rebuke. No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the son of man.

In other words, I have come from the relationship with God of what we are speaking about, and I have come to explain this to you. And Nicodemus is completely vacuous in front of him.

I think the conversation that night is over. You'll see next week when we get to 316, how John the writer reflects on this conversation on religion.

But there was nothing more Jesus could do that night to help Nicodemus get it. Except one thing.

[25 : 09] Look at the way he closes. Verse 14. Having alluded to Ezekiel earlier, he now makes more than an allusion.

He almost is now making a direct citation from Nicodemus' text, that is the Hebrew scriptures, and numbers 21.

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him shall have eternal life.

Now, if you've never read the Bible, you're looking at that going, what do we make of that? Well, that's why I'm here. That's why we have a preacher. We need someone to help explain these things.

In Numbers 21, there is material on Israel in the wilderness years, and their rejection of God's ways, and their living, while born into relationship with God by being a Jew, they were not living under God's word, and therefore God brings this fiery, biting judgment upon their improperly construed relationship with him.

[26 : 41] So, what happens is, in that point, back in Numbers 21, God sends these fiery serpents into the camp.

Now, you can just imagine it. I mean, I'm not, I grew up camping, but we don't do a lot of camping now. But some people like to get out there and see all the wildlife. Well, you go have at it.

But all of a sudden, in Israel's campground, came these serpents, and they weren't garter snakes, and they weren't to be petted. These things, when they began to bite, produce death.

That's what's happening in Numbers 21. Slithering serpents entering a camp, at the direction of God as instruments of wrath for the people's sin.

But, by an act of God's mercy, at the same time as he is judging them, he provides a way of refreshed relationship to them.

[27 : 55] He told Moses, Moses, you can go read it this afternoon for yourself, he told Moses to make a serpent from bronze, lift it high on a pole, right in the middle of the camp, it says.

So you can imagine this tall pole, I'm guessing it's got to be as high as some of our cell towers. I mean, as high as they could get it, however high they could get it. And up top is a bronze serpent.

And then God instructs Moses to instruct the people that whoever is bitten by the fiery serpent, if they will merely look to the bronze serpent, if they will look to what God lifts up, they will find life.

And then the conversation is over. Nicodemus retreats back into the darkness, darkness, unsure of himself.

How do I relate to God? Well, let me refresh what the young man told me tonight. My religion is not enough.

[29 : 11] My confidence might actually be keeping me from receiving the witness I need to hear. now how long it was between Jesus' words to him about the serpent in the wilderness and Jesus' death, I do not know.

But watch this. This is stunning. Nicodemus returns in John's gospel at the end.

And you got to see it with your own eyes to believe it. And so you ought to turn over to John 19, just a few pages on.

There's a paragraph beginning at verse 38 where Jesus is now buried. You remember Jesus was lifted up on a cross and died via crucifixion.

And it's at that moment we're now picking up the scene and Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus but secretly, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus and Pilate gave him permission.

[30 : 33] So he came and took away his body. Now look, here it is. Here he is. He's come back into the gospel narrative at verse 39. Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, just to make sure you know as a reader, it's the same guy.

They came bringing myrrh and aloes about 75 pounds in weight and they took the body of Jesus and bound it with linen cloths and spices as is the burial custom of the Jews.

In other words, Nicodemus is there as Jesus is taken off the cross. Let me see if I can put it to you as clearly as I can.

Nicodemus is standing beneath the cross. That's where he is. And we stand there with him.

And as he looks up, he puts his eyes on Jesus. And for me, his mind must have flooded or we wouldn't have heard of this recounting so many years later that this early scene with him was related to this later scene with him.

[32 : 03] I can imagine Nicodemus, and I don't think this is being loose with the text, casting his eyes on Jesus and wondering could it be?

Is this what he said to me on the night I had my conversation? The serpent, yes, the serpent lifted up high on the pole.

God's wrath turned away. Life given, relationship restored, and now this man, Jesus, lifted up for all to see. Now remember Jesus, a couple of nights previous to this, had actually said, when I am lifted up, I will draw all men to myself.

No amount of effort can satisfy Nicodemus' wayward way. A substitute was what he needed and a substitute was what he was looking at.

He was looking at a sign. He was looking at a symbol. He was looking at a person. He was looking at death conquered. The serpent's bite.

[33 : 17] God, he prays, send your spirit. Wash me of my sin like water. Breathe on me as we sang today, O breath of God.

And what about you? What is the role that religion plays in securing and maintaining your relationship to God?

religion by way of ritual and approach is replaced with faith in the sign that indicates the removal of God's wrath.

God's love. How can you know God? Simply by looking to Jesus and saying, Lord, save me.

I can't get there from here. But you who dwelt there has come down here that God might cast a merciful eye on me.

[35 : 07] If you have never understood that and today it's falling fresh, then I just would ask you to do like Nicodemus this morning and move from that conversation to the cross and take Jesus down as you have learned to take these other things away and be buried with him in death that through him you might live.

may the Holy Spirit which is like the wind something you cannot see may the Holy Spirit which is more refreshing than the wind which eases your external comfort may the Holy Spirit add his blessing to the preaching and hearing of this word that this room would not have one person not one walk out as it were still in the darkness of night our heavenly father thank you for sending your son to take the deadness of our bone and marrow and refresh it with the life blood of Christ you've given us all physical birth give us all all every man every woman every child under the hearing of my voice breathe on us give us life in your son in whose name we pray amen to them to them