

John: The Word Became Flesh - John 3:1-21

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[0 : 0 0] Today we're going to look at a passage that is very familiar with us. And if you are a guest with us today we are walking through the Gospel of John. It's the fourth book in the New Testament. I welcome you to turn there. We'll be looking at John chapter 3 verses 1 through 21 the very verses that Yamisi just read to us. And because this is a relatively familiar book to us I want to caution us. Biblical familiarity is what I refer to as like a double-edged virtue. It's a double-edged virtue in that it's a virtue in that biblical familiarity helps deepen our communion with God. When we can recall to our mind scriptures that cause us to reflect upon the truth of God in times of adversity, there's a beauty of being familiar with God's Word. It can deepen our communion with the

Lord. But on the flip side of that, the other double-edged side of that virtue, is there's two negative things that I can think of that are hamper or are consequences of biblical familiarity if we're not careful. Is that we can misconstrue biblical truth. For example, I remember being in college and I was in a Bible study small group. I was a young believer at the time. And I said, oh I remember when Jesus after the resurrection walked through walls. And the person leading the study said, say that again. And I said, oh you remember Jesus walked through walls after he rose from the dead. And he said, well let's look at that. And so he took me to the Gospel of John, looked at chapter 21, and he says it says that he appeared in a locked room. It doesn't tell us how he got there. He could have picked the lock. He could have been like the paralytic, lay really lowered from the rooftop. He could have knocked and someone unlocked, let him in, locked the door again. And he's now in a locked room. We don't know how he got there. Or he could have walked through the wall. But we don't know. I was like, oh. But you can see how familiarity with God's word sometimes if we're not careful. We can be a little sloppy and we can say some things that are not true. He appeared in a locked room. That's true. How he got there, I don't know. Second, biblical familiarity can pilfer the Bible's riches. I remember a time in my life when I recalled studying the Noah and the Ark. And I simply used to think of the childhood story of God being angered by the sin of the world. And so God sends this flood and promises not to flood the earth again like that and sends this beautiful rainbow. And that's about all I considered. But I remember considering Noah and the Ark another time and I thought, boy, God flooded the earth and all of this wickedness was eliminated from the face of the earth. And yet what cannot be eliminated is the sinfulness of man's heart. And so these eight people are just now released from this Ark and now released on this world.

And sure enough, what happens again is all of this sin begins to fill the earth one more time. And it causes us to long for a time and a day when hearts of stone will be made like hearts of flesh, when mankind's sinfulness can be forgiven and a whole new nature can be given to mankind. It makes us long for a day when that would happen. And not in a way that the flood occurred on the earth, but a way that sin can be forgiven. It makes us long for the Messiah. And so the story of Noah and the Ark, if you will, I saw it in a different light. And but if not careful, we can, our biblical familiarity can kind of pilfer us from God's riches that he has for us in his word. Why do I begin this way? It's because our passage today may be very familiar to us. It probably contains are the very first Bible verse we may have memorized. And so I wouldn't welcome you to say it with me. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son. And who forever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. And of course we all memorize that in a different translation. And so a little differing there. But but our familiarity with this passage can kind of, and I pray that today it wouldn't pilfer from God's riches. So let us look at this wonderful story, a fresh and a new. And what do we see in this passage? First thing I want to see is Nicodemus' religious credentials. That's what verses one and two bring to light. That's what the author John is trying to show us is that Nicodemus is this amazing person with amazing religious credentialing. We see in verses one and two, now there was a man

of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the

[5 : 38] Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi we know that you are a teacher who come from God but no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him. And before we begin to see his religious credentials sometimes I lament at the chapter breaks that we find in Scripture. So when John was writing this original letter he did not have chapter breaks in verses. Those are put in for us to be able to reference Scripture quickly with four and with one another. And so what I want us to see is, imagine chapter three verse one wasn't there and we were just reading a flow of thought that John has written. And so we would look at some three previous verses. If you remember last week Jesus is in the temple mount, he's overturning tables, he's throwing out the money changers, he's with a whip getting the livestock off of the temple mount and he is cleaning house. And then we see in verses 23, 24 and 25 in chapter 2 that

Jesus does not entrust himself to those who believe in him because he knows what's in their heart. Remember that? And then right after that we read about Nicodemus and notice how chapter 3 verse 1 begins. Now there was a man of the Pharisees of Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. So John is either going to say one or two things here. Is John saying, let me tell you about a man who Jesus did not entrust himself to because he didn't believe his belief, if you will. He knew what was in his heart. So let me illustrate this story with a man named Nicodemus. Is John the author writing that or is John writing? Let me tell you a man though who Jesus did entrust himself to. His name was Nicodemus. He was a ruler of the Pharisees. He was a Pharisee, a ruler in the nation of Israel, of the Jews. Let me tell you a man who did, Jesus did entrust himself to and he is unlike those who previously believed that Jesus did not entrust. Which one is it? The context, and by the way, were never told explicitly whether Nicodemus came to faith in Christ or not. However, we do find in chapter 3, we see, or sorry, chapter 3, we see Nicodemus' desire to know Christ. He seeks Jesus out in the evening. He desires to know Christ. In chapter 7, we see Nicodemus defending Jesus. There are people who are seeking to arrest Jesus and Nicodemus in chapter 7 verse 51. He says this, does the law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does? So he stops the religious leaders from arresting and he stands up and he defends Jesus. Then later in chapter 19, we see Nicodemus show up again around verse 39. What do we see of Nicodemus toward the end? Jesus has now been crucified on the cross. Joseph of

Ereph, Matthew, seeks to, he asks Pilate, can I have Jesus' body to give him a proper burial? And we see Nicodemus giving, he gave 75 pounds worth of myrrh and aloes to prepare Jesus' body. So we see him in chapter 3, he desires to know the Lord. In chapter 7, we see him defending Christ and then we see in chapter 19, we see his devotion to Christ. So I believe Nicodemus is a man who came to faith in Christ. So when we see in chapter 3 verse 1, when we see, but now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus who was a ruler of the Jews, I read it to say, I know there was previously people who Jesus did not entrust himself to because he knew it was in their heart, but let me tell you of a man who Jesus did entrust himself to, his name is Nicodemus. He's a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, and Jesus does entrust himself. So that's what I believe is being communicated by John here. And isn't that just one of the most unfortunate chapter breaks we have in the Bible? Now you can agree. Okay. On to our passage. Nicodemus' religious credentials. Look at how serious he is about his religion. We're gonna see several things. He's serious about his form of Judaism. He's a Pharisee. That is, he's a lower to middle class religious leader who has a zeal to obey the law. Specifically, the 613 commands of the law of Moses that we find in the Old Testament. 248 of them were prescribed of things you must do, and they're leaving 365 laws prescribing things he was to avoid or not do. And these men were devoted to fulfilling every command of

Scripture. When someone had pledged to be a Pharisee like Nicodemus, he had to do so in front of three witnesses to uphold every detail of the law for the rest of his life. He was a very religious man. That would also mean he's very morally upstanding. Nicodemus did not have any skeletons in his closet. Nothing he had. He had nothing to necessarily be ashamed of. Nicodemus was a powerful leader. We see that he was a ruler of the Jews in verse 3, verse 1, meaning that he was most likely a member of the Sanhedrin. If you combine today's United States Senate and the United States Supreme Court, and you put those together and add a little religion to it, you have the Sanhedrin. These were 70 men who led by the high priest Caiaphas and Annas, who serve as a governing body to the nation of Israel. Underneath Rome's rule, of course. Nicodemus was also kind and respectful. He referred to Jesus as Rabbi or teacher, Rabbi, a title of respect.

In fact, the title indicates that he is referring to Jesus as an equal. He is a ruler. He is a teacher of the law, and he finds Jesus to be a teacher of the law as well, Rabbi, and he's very respectful toward Jesus, which would also mean for Nicodemus' sake he was very extremely knowledgeable. He says he's in... Jesus refers to Nicodemus. We haven't gotten there yet, but in verse 10 he says, you're a teacher of Israel. Nicodemus would have had much of the Old Testament memorized. He would have been an expert specifically in the 613 commands of the Law of Moses. Matt Carter, I appreciate reading him today, or this last week in studying for the sermon. He said this, if Nicodemus were around today, here's how we would have thought of him. Man, I wish we had hired him instead of our pastor.

[13 : 08] He has much better credentials. He is more serious about keeping the law. He has made far fewer mistakes. He's more humble. He knows the Bible better. He comes from a more prominent position. He has everything our church should be looking for in a pastor and much more, and all of that I just have to say is I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

But Nicodemus has a problem. Nicodemus has a problem. That religious credentials are insufficient to save. Look with me in verse 3.

Jesus answered him, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Here is Jesus' response to Nicodemus, is in vivid contrast to what Nicodemus has just said of Jesus. For no one can do these things, is what Nicodemus said. Let me share. Let me try to point out something.

In verse 2, if you will, we see in verse 2, when Nicodemus says to Jesus in verse 2, this man came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who comes from God and no one can do these signs. Some translations say no one is able to do these signs. Look now with me in verse 3. Jesus is playing on that word, can do or is able in verse 3. And Jesus answered him, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot or he is not able to see the kingdom of God. He's using that word again and he's playing with that word.

Unless one is born from above or born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Jesus is communicating to Nicodemus, your religious credentials are not good enough for you to enter heaven. The only way you can enter heaven is through rebirth or being born again, born from above. And in some ways I wish I would have been there in that encounter because I would have loved to have seen Nicodemus' face. Because Jesus is taking a sledgehammer and shattering the foundation that Nicodemus is standing on. Nicodemus has lived his whole life assuming his religious credentials and the fact that he was born a Jew is what exactly gives him entrance into the kingdom of God. And Jesus is communicating, I'm sorry Nicodemus, you're wrong, you're not good enough.

[15 : 52] Entrance into heaven is out of reach, even for the most morally upstanding, law-keeping person that you are. And what's...

That information is so appropriate for us today, still today. When I am sharing the gospel with individuals and we get to a part of the conversation where they are communicating to me how it is and why it is that they believe that they should have entrance into heaven, it almost always comes down to, well, I'm a good person. And often they compare their goodness of personhood to their neighbor.

Well, I'm better than most. And Jesus would be taking that same sledgehammer to those foundations and saying, I'm so sorry. Being a good person, religious credentials growing up in the church, having Christian parents, it is powerless to save you. It does not give you the entrance or access into heaven. If there is nothing more required than merely being a good person, Nicodemus should have surely qualified. Yet Jesus said, Nicodemus, you must be born again. Which brings us to the third. That the new birth is the only sufficient credential to have access to the kingdom. And John chapter 3, 4 through 13, Yamisi already read this. I'm just going to spotlight verses 5 and 6 for our sake. When 5 and 6, 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.

Jesus uses this word unless in verse 5, unless one is born of water and of the spirit, unless. The new birth is this exclusive way to know God and enter into heaven. Nicodemus does not have categories to understand even what Jesus is talking about yet. How can someone be born again or born a second time? So he asks in verse 4, how can a man be born when he is old and he enter a second time into his mother's womb? How can he be born again? There is disagreement among

scholars when Jesus says unless one is born of water and of spirit, what water is and spirit is less, is not controversial much at all. But one born of water. Some scholars say, well, this is meaning that one is born of water means first one has to repent, water being linked to repentance and then born of the spirit. Others, and I take this view that I'm about to mention, say no, it just means rather physical birth. One being physical birth. So water being a physical birth and then you must be born again into a spiritual birth. And so one cannot enter heaven unless one is physically born and then spiritually born is what Jesus is communicating and I hold that view. Why do I hold that view is partly because of verse 6. Notice what born of water is linked to in verse 6. That which is born of flesh is flesh. So the first one, water is flesh is flesh. So born physically and then secondly, born of the spirit is spirit.

Then you have to have a spiritual birth if you will. As an aside, I was sharing this text with Dr. Vreeland and we were discussing this and he shared with me that as he had spent some time in East Africa that it was an insult to say of someone that he is not from my water or of my water. He is not from my water. So let's imagine I did something foolish. I fell down the stairs. You would all say he is not from my water meaning he's not from my family lineage. He's not born in my family. We don't own him and that's an insult. And so even today this water image being of physical birth is used in East Africa.

[20 : 43] If we consider what Jesus is saying here, that which is born of natural birth is natural birth and that which is born of spiritual birth or spiritual is of spiritual birth. It requires a spiritual birth. He is communicating to Nicodemus no matter who a person is. He is actually kept out of God's kingdom by one's own sin. He is only let in if he is born again and the spirit of God makes a person alive anew from the inside out. In spite of learning this, Nicodemus had missed it. Nicodemus was so focused on cleaning up the outside and keeping the external laws that he had missed what Jesus had said. The Pharisees thought God wanted radical external for conformity and they had missed the promise of an internal radical transformation. And we can make the same mistake. We often may think if I just get my life in order, if I get a haircut, I start making better choices, avoid sin, speaking nicely to others, going to church, maybe then God will be pleased with me. But God is not interested in your personal remodeling project. He wants to remake and reshape you from the inside out. What is so hard for us is also very difficult for Nicodemus. We struggle to understand just how bad we are. We think we are pretty good. We think our credentials will stand up under God's examination and we will fail 100% of the time and we do not understand what God's requirement is and that is perfection. We will fail 100% of the time to be perfect. We are far from perfect. We need so much more than just a little touch up. Our radical corruption from sin demands a radical redemption from God and we need a new birth spiritually. And Jesus likens the

Spirit in verse 8 to wind just as the wind blows where it wishes so too God will sense his Spirit and he makes a life to whomever he wishes. Salvation is God's sovereign work on whomever he wishes and he sends his Spirit to whomever.

And what can we notice when we see the effects of wind? If we were to go to the state of Florida and we see trees downed and we see trash strewn apart and we see the effects of a storm surge way inland and we were to see roofs lifted off and power poles down and we would assume boy there must have been a mighty wind like a hurricane that ripped through here. You can see the effects of the wind and so too you can see the effects of the Spirit of someone's life. We see someone who desires to please God. We see someone who thinks differently, which informs their behavior, which informs their speech, which informs their generosity, their kindness, their goodness, their self-control, their selflessness.

One can tell when someone has been regenerated by the Spirit and Nicodemus asks in verse 9 how can these things be and this is the last time that Nicodemus speaks in this section. Poor Nicodemus he is stuck in his intellectual and philosophical quagmire of the earthly realities. His earlier lack of comprehension now seems to be deteriorating into helpless doubt. But when the Spirit comes upon a person things are different. One of the most hated men in America in 1979, 1980 was a man whose name is Chuck Colson many of you are familiar with him. He was the special counsel to President Nixon. He was wrapped up in the Watergate scandal and he was sent to prison for his obstruction of justice. He was one of the most hated men in that period of time. Many of you remember that period of time and yet when he was in prison and through a series of events he came to know the Lord and people questioned whether he came to know the Lord or not. He wrote a book called Born Again off of this passage. Something had radically happened. The

Spirit of God he was born again by the Spirit of God and that began to be evident in his life. He began a ministry of prison fellowship and he had a little five minute two minute radio spot called Breakpoint for years. His life changed radically and the Spirit blew into his life and everyone could tell the effects of the Spirit upon his life. Then we come to the most passage where most of us have that verse memorized, John 3.16. But I want to begin in verse 14. Thankfully for Nicodemus Jesus becomes a little more descriptive to aid his understanding. How can these things be? Nicodemus is asking. In verse 14 through 16 we read, and as Moses was lifted up in the serpent in the wilderness so must the Son of man be also.

[26 : 48] Must be lifted up and whoever believes in him the one who is lifted up may have eternal life. For God so loved this world that he gave his only son and whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. What is this serpent that lifted it up that is recorded here about Moses? We see in Numbers chapter 21 that the people of Israel were brought out of the land of Egypt. God saved them miraculously and now they're in the wilderness and they're tired of eating manna and they're tired of seemingly going nowhere and so they began to grumble and they began to complain. All that God had provided for them. And we read in Numbers 21 verses 8 and 9 we see this. So the Lord said to Moses make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole and everyone who has been bitten by snakes by the way the Lord was tired of their complaining and so he's been sent snakes to poison and bite them and so we had all these people dying in the wilderness, the people of Israel. And Moses so then this is the solution.

That was a key point that I omitted previously. Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole and everyone who has been bitten and sees it shall live. So Moses bronze serpent and set it on a pole and if a serpent bit anyone he who looked upon the bronze serpent shall live. So now we find this passage and he says and as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so the Son of Man must be lifted up. And just as people in Moses's day were bitten and dying and they all they had to do by faith was to look at a serpent that had been raised up in the wilderness and they would be healed. So too do all sinful men bitten by sin and dying. All one needs to do by faith is look at Jesus on the cross who had been lifted up and believe he paid the penalty for sin on the cross and one will have eternal life. Have you ever had a season when you question God's love for you? John 3.16 should remedy that. It's an interesting word for God's so loved. We often use the word so in one of two ways. We can use it as an expression of intensity. I love you so much. However in this context the word so is not written in that way. It is meaning that God it is a demonstration of. So God loved you in this way. He did it like so. How did he do it? For God so loved the world. You could read it. For God so demonstrated his love for the world that he gave his only son. That whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. If you were to ask me how do you know Scott that your wife loves you? Probably what I would not say is well because she tells me. And she does. She often says,

Scott I love you. She'll text me. I love you Scott. But how I know God my wife loves me is she cooks food. In addition to cooking food for me she does a number of things that demonstrates her love for me. She demonstrates her affection for me with appropriate touch and encourages me. She speaks words of encouragement. She sits down and has conversation. She shares with me what's on her heart. She includes me in her life. She prays with me. She shares what God is teaching her. She does all of these things. She's faithful and she does all of these things. And she demonstrates her love toward me. Just in that way this word so is being used. God loved the world that he gave his only son. This speaks to Christ's sacrifice. The father offered something that is most dear to him. Someone who he cared about. He loved deeply his son. The second member of the Godhead. It is not like a boy who gifts wrap a toy that he no longer plays with to give to his younger brother. That's not what's happening. He gave his only son.

The second member of the Godhead. God doesn't require us to pay something or to purchase it. Nor does he do you have to do anything to earn it. Salvation is free but it is not cheap. This gift costs us nothing but it costs the son of God his very life. God's willing to sacrifice his son for you. That's how he demonstrated his love. So if there is ever times in your life where you may question God's love for you, be reminded. God demonstrated his love for you and sending his very and only son. And that give us access and to forgiveness through Jesus.

[32 : 43] We come to the fifth point, verses 17 and 18. Jesus came to save the world from sin. Why did Jesus come? For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned but whoever

does not believe is condemned already because he does not believe in the name of the only son of God. Verse 18, whoever does not believe is condemned already. Why is one condemned? Because he is not believed in the only son of God. This flies in the face of our pluralistic and relativistic culture where we believe there are multiple ways to God and so long as one is sincere you will go to heaven in your understanding your belief system and unfortunately there are folks who are very sincerely wrong. One is condemned if one does not believe in the son of God.

There are not multiple ways. Jesus says I am the only way. I am the way, the truth and the life. No one goes to the Father but through me. And then look in verse 17.

But God wishes that none to perish for none to be condemned and out of his immeasurable love he sent his only son to atone for sin to forgive sin and anyone who accepts God's only provision for sin through his son will not be condemned but be saved through Christ and through Christ alone.

Salvation is found in no other name than in Jesus Christ. And last, there exists two options to the gospel. This good news of Jesus Christ. One is to believe and the other is to not believe. And we find in here both responses to the gospel verses 19 and 20 many do not believe. So we read in verses 19 and 20 and this is the judgment that the light has come into the world and people love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil. But everyone who does wicked hates, I'm sorry, but everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light lest his works be exposed. And whoever does what is true comes to the light so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God. Words like condemnation and judgment could make one question could make one question that God is not loving. But these verses make it clear condemnation is the result of the refusal to accept God's gift.

People will face the consequences of sin not because God's gift of Jesus is insufficient but because they refuse to turn from their sin and trust Jesus alone to save them from their sin penalty. Because people look in verse 19 they love darkness rather than light. Look at verse 19. Why do they do this? Because their their works are evil. Why did they do this verse 20? Because they do wickedly.

Simply stated, if you reject Jesus Christ you have no one to blame but yourself. When people reject God's gift it reveals the condition of one's heart. It reveals one's heart blinded by sin. The fault lies with the sinner not the Savior. And Nicodemus heard what Jesus had said and at some point he must have believed it with his heart. He desires the Lord. He defends the Lord and he later it is devoted to the Lord. What do we do with this? I find three application points. Number one, if you are here today and you have never accepted God's provision to forgive sin in his Son, I pray that we would be reminded by this verse that we many have memorized. For God demonstrated his love to you in this way that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. I pray just as Moses lifted that serpent in the wilderness and all who looked upon that servant by faith were healed. Did not die. That today you would look at Christ who was on the cross and say he paid the penalty for my sin. I believe Jesus Christ and him alone. So I say it this way in point number four. One must believe in the person in the work of

[38 : 12] Christ. You must have the right person that is Jesus is fully God and fully man. And the second person of the Godhead condescended to earth. Born of a virgin, lived a sinless life. He died for sin on the cross. Buried in the tomb.

Three days later rose from the grave and all who believe and that person and that work will be saved. And I encourage you today to believe that. For your salvation if you want to chat with someone about that afterward myself and others are more than available to have that conversation. To answer any questions you may have. Number two. Sometimes life circumstances cause us to question God's love. I pray as we consider the text today I pray that we would confess Lord forgive me. Forgive me for doubting your love for me. You demonstrated your love for me in immeasurable ways that cost you deeply. Forgive me for questioning your love for me. Some in this room may need to confess. Others we ought to be encouraged in this way. How liberating to communicate the gospel to others. There is no other name by which men can be saved than Jesus Christ. So when we go and we share. We're not offering a pluralistic relativistic gospel to just be sincere in your faith no matter what it is. There's multiple roads. No no no no no. There's only one way and we have the privilege to communicate that one way to our friends and to our family. We should be unashamed about that. We know the consequence of what will occur to someone if they don't believe. You have the opportunity to communicate the greatest news even to the most moral person like Nicodemus or to the most evil person that you can consider much how people thought of Chuck Colton. Much how people thought of the Apostle Paul before he was saved. He was on his way to imprison believers

or the most evil person like a terrorist of Hamas. It's the same gospel that can transform a life and offer that person eternal life in Jesus Christ where one doesn't have to pay the penalty for sin and we have that opportunity to share this good news. This week I was reading the Gospel of John. I'm just reviewing it multiple times as we are preaching this passage and I welcome you just to read over and over again the Gospel of John. I paused at John 5 verse 24 this week where it says truly truly I say to you whoever hears my word this is Jesus speaking and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life. So for our families, for our colleagues, for our co-workers, for those who we room with, for those who we go to school, our neighbors, may we be bold in this beautiful news that God demonstrated his love for us in this way that he sent his son that all who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life. Oh what good news that is.

Father thank you so much for this day. Thank you for the privilege to proclaim your word. Lord thank you that we are not saved by our religious credentials, our moral life that we we live. Thank you that salvation is only found in your son.

Lord I pray that we would be encouraged today. We'd be encouraged not only in our own life but we would be emboldened to go share with others this wonderful beautiful news that Jesus saves to all who believe in his person and work.

Thank you Lord for doing that on our behalf and the words thank you fall short of the gratitude we ought to feel for never being condemned in your sight, never having to pay the penalty for our own sin. You did that in our stead. Thank you and it's in your beautiful name Jesus we pray. Amen.