

John 3:1-21 “The Gift of Life”

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Kids, we're going to start the sermon by inviting you up here. Isn't that what you always wanted to do? Come up here during the sermon? Come up here and we're going to talk on the steps for just a minute before some of you leave us.

We'll talk right over here. Anybody who thinks you're a kid, you know. All right. Do any of y'all like gifts? Do you like presents?

Can I tell you something about this one? It's empty. It's not a real present, okay? I want to get that out of the way early before I disappoint you. There's nothing inside, okay?

But I brought it because I really like presents too. And we get presents at different times. We've had multiple birthdays at my house this week. Does anybody like having birthdays?

[1 : 01] Yes. Do you sometimes get presents on your birthdays? Yes. My birthday. Yes.

Sometimes the gifts that we really, really want are ones that we don't have enough money to buy.

Have you ever had that? There's something you really want, but you can't get it for yourself? We had someone turn 16 in our house this week. And I don't think she had enough money to buy a car.

Unfortunately, neither did her parents. But when our kids were younger, they used to say things like, Dad, will you buy me Disney? Now, does any of you have enough money to buy Disney?

Yes. I don't think so. Buy me Disney? I was like, oh, man. But they really wanted to go to Disney World, right? Sometimes there's something that you really want that you don't have enough money to get.

And your parents love you so much that they're able to give you a gift like that, right? Something that you wanted that you couldn't give for yourself. There's a verse that we're going to talk about in the sermon this morning that I think some of y'all have heard.

[2 : 11] It talks about God giving us a gift that we can't get for ourselves. Does anybody know John 3, 16? Have you heard of that?

Can any of y'all help me figure out how it goes? God so loved the world that he gave us his only son so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

Very good. Each of us got parts of that, right? God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

God, can you give yourself life? Did you give yourself life when you were born the first time? No, you weren't in charge of that. Can you give yourself life?

No. But what does God do? God gives us Jesus. That's right. God gives us Jesus, his son, so that we can have life.

[3 : 16] Life with him. Life forever. Forever. Did you know God loves you that much? Kind of like sometimes your parents give you a picture of that in their love for you.

He loves you so much that he gives his son for you. I want you, some of y'all are about to leave, I know. But those of you who stay in here, I want you to listen to the sermon. I especially want you to watch when we celebrate the Lord's Supper.

Maybe you'll come up with your family as we celebrate the Lord's Supper. And remember, as you do, how much God loves you and the gift that God gave you through his son of life with him forever.

Okay? Can we pray about that before you go back? God, thank you for that great gift. Thank you that you love us so much. I pray that these kids would know that love.

That they'd experience that from others and their families and this church family. That they would know today that they can live with you forever. For the rest of their lives here and through eternity.

[4 : 18] We thank you for that great gift. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. All right, those of you in kindergarten and first grade, if you go right out that back door, Miss Beth will be back there to meet you for kids' worship.

And the rest of you can go back to where you were sitting. Thank you all for coming up here. Perhaps you've heard that verse before.

It's a great verse. We're going to cover 21 verses this morning. Maybe you've forgotten. You've heard it so many times you forgot the context that we find it in.

The context of John 3.16 is a conversation between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus.

Nicodemus is a religious leader in Jerusalem.

Perhaps the foremost Jewish theologian of his day. And he comes to this new on the scene teacher with some questions.

[5 : 28] He's wrestling with who Jesus is. And what the implications of that would be for his life. And so he comes to Jesus.

Before we start reading this story, let me just say, that's such a great idea. Maybe you have questions of your own. Things that you're uncertain about in life.

Confusion surrounding who Jesus is and what that will mean. Jesus welcomes those questions.

What better place to go with questions like that than to him.

Virtually everyone agrees that Jesus is one of, if not the single most influential person in world history. So figuring out what you think about him is so important.

This morning we get to listen in on his conversation with Nicodemus and see what we learn. Okay.

First, John sets the stage.

[6 : 31] 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.

Nicodemus has seen or heard some things about Jesus. Maybe reports of turning water into wine at the wedding, right? Surely he's heard about the authority with which Jesus just cleansed the temple.

Perhaps other powerful words or deeds that Jesus has been doing. But Jesus has attracted the attention of this really impressive, very religious leader.

Nicodemus is intrigued by all that's going on. He's excited because he sees signs of God's kingdom. Display of God's power.

Nicodemus knows about this. He's looked forward to this and he's not even asking something specific yet. He just wants to hear Jesus' take on all this. How's all this kingdom signs and power fit together?

[7 : 41] I think many of us are like Nicodemus, growing up around the things of God, learning about the Bible, being taught to live according to God's law.

What's on his heart as he comes to Jesus will likely represent us well. And if you're not so religious by background, stick with the conversation because we're about to see that that's maybe not so important as we might think.

Or as Nicodemus might have imagined. Because no matter our backgrounds, we're all wondering the same types of things like Nicodemus. Where do I find life?

How can I fix what's wrong with me? Where can I have real solid hope? Something I can count on.

Those are the kinds of issues that would be on his heart as he explores the signs of God's kingdom that he's seeing.

What does Jesus say to him? Jesus answered him, Nicodemus, you won't even see the kingdom.

[8 : 57] You won't recognize it clearly unless you are born again. It is hard to describe how shocking this would have been to a leader like Nicodemus.

He would have assumed that being born a Jew, being born into Abraham's family, that he was in the kingdom of God. Unless he did something really bad to mess that up.

What do you mean be born again? Nicodemus said to him, How can a man be born when he's old?

Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?

Now Jesus is going to explain again. I love that he speaks Nicodemus' language here. For the first of two times, he's going to cite the Old Testament that Nicodemus knows so well.

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.

[10:05] 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. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

You must be born again, Jesus says. Three times now he has made the necessity of new birth clear. And that's for everyone, by the way, not just Nicodemus specifically.

The you is plural. Y'all must be born again. New birth is essential, even for the most religious. We're all on the same level here, right?

No matter what our backgrounds are. We need a complete restart. We need everything to be new. Not merely a small adjustment to your approach to things. Not a little additional knowledge to perfect that which you've really known all your life, and you're already pretty good at.

No, no. A new birth. A new birth from above. That's another translation of the same word for again.

[11:16] You may see a note in your Bible to that effect. Born again from above. Remember in John's prologue, the first chapter, he said those who received Jesus, who believed in him, could become children of God.

How? How would they be born into that family? Not of blood. Not of the will of the flesh. Not of the will of man.

But born of God. Here's the rub, right? You must be born again. Necessity.

But you can't. Impossibility. Just as you couldn't make your birth happen the first time, just as Nicodemus realizes you can't do it again physically, you can't give yourself new birth.

Jesus is quite clear. The thing you most need is something you can't give yourself. See, new birth is not something you do, like obey a little bit more, or be a little more theologically precise.

[12:34] No, it's not like that. It's something you receive. That's what Jesus means when he equates being born again with born of water and the Spirit.

That's one thing, by the way, one birth. He's sending Nicodemus back to the prophets to show him that this birth from God has always been the hope of God's people.

Listen to the prophet Ezekiel when he tells God's people about their future hope, the new covenant to redeem them, to return them from the nations they've been scattered to, to restore them to relationship with God.

He writes this in chapter 36, I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses. From all your idols, I will cleanse you and I will give you a new heart, a new spirit I will put within you.

And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

[13:42] You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers and you shall be my people and I will be your God. What a glorious, glorious picture.

What a great promise from God, right? This is what he is going to do. Cleansed with water. Filled with the spirit. Who gives life by the water and the spirit?

God says, I will. I will. I will. I will. In fact, as Ezekiel keeps talking, he gives God's people a picture of a valley of dry bones.

It's in chapter 37, the next chapter. A huge pile of bones, just dead and dry like Israel. But thus says the Lord to these dry bones, I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live.

And God sends the spirit, the breath, the bones come to life like a great army. And verse 14, I will put my spirit within you and you shall live.

[14:55] And I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord. I have spoken and I will do it, declares the Lord. Do you hear what God's saying?

God is saying to his people then, and Jesus is reiterating to his people in Nicodemus' day, I give life by water and the spirit.

That's how you first came to be when I breathed life into you, the breath of life. And you became a living being and that's how you become part of my kingdom.

You need cleansing and a new heart and relationship where I dwell with you. So even though you can't explain it, even though you may not know it's happening, the spirit will blow like the wind and you'll see and you'll feel life, completely new and different, born of God, born from above.

That's, by the way, all Christians, right? Born again. Jesus says that's all Christians, not some political interest group, not just the especially zealous kind of weird, fringe Christians who are really

radical.

[16:09] No, no, no. All Christians must be born again. But of course they can't themselves. Now maybe you hear that and you think that new birth is such good news.

It is. New life from God, right? But maybe if you're honest, you're still kind of confused. You're like Nicodemus. You're like me.

You've been around church. You've lived there. You've been around people talking about God and calling themselves Christians. And so being a Christian is just what you thought you were because you were born that way and you never decided to change.

So this impossible necessity could be pretty confusing or even discouraging. Am I born again? Can I be? How? I mean, I'm in church all the time, but I don't know what to do. Nicodemus understands.

[17:13] He's hearing the concept too, but he still wants to know how. How, verse nine, Nicodemus says to Jesus, how can these things be?

How's that happen? What Jesus is about to do in the next few verses is he's going to open up the wonder of heaven, the glory of God's amazing love, the beauty of the heart of God to help Nicodemus understand something very simple.

that because you can't give yourself what you most need, God gives you that gift. It is necessarily simple.

Verse 10, Jesus answered him, are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Connect the dots, Nicodemus. Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and 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? Here they come. Heavenly things. It's going to get even more glorious.

[18:29] Verse 13, no one has ascended into heaven except him who descended from heaven, the son of man. That new birth, Nicodemus, it comes from above and because you must have it and you couldn't find your way to heaven, to God, God himself has come to you.

Uniquely in Jesus, the son of man, that's what he calls himself, heaven comes to you, Nicodemus. That's what's going on. This is what you need to grasp, Nicodemus, if you're still confused.

I'm going to give you one more Old Testament example, Jesus says, Numbers chapter 21. God's people have gotten impatient in the wilderness. They're complaining, right?

They're complaining about the food. They're complaining about Moses. They're complaining about God. Not good. And God sends serpents serpents to bite them and they begin to die.

Moses prays to God on behalf of the people and the Lord responds, verse 8, he says to Moses, make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole and everyone who is bitten when he sees it shall live.

[19:56] So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole and if a serpent bit anyone, he would look up at the bronze serpent and live. People, deservingly condemned to die, look up at something outside of themselves, in fact, at the very thing that was killing them and they live.

Mercy, right? Deliverance, salvation. Remember that, Nicodemus? Verse 14, 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.

When Jesus says, lift it up, to be clear, he's talking, we find this out later in John's story, about his death on the cross. When Jesus takes our sin upon himself, when he becomes sin for us, so that just like with the snake, people deservingly condemned to die, like you and me, look up at something outside of themselves, in fact, the very thing, sin, that is killing them and they live.

That is the good news, Nicodemus. You're trying to figure out exactly how Jesus fits into the kingdom of God, how you can have hope, where your problems get solved, and Jesus is saying, listen, listen, look to me.

Trust me. God is giving you the gift that you must have and you receive the gift of life that you could not afford for yourself by looking to me, by trusting me.

[21:46] And now our beloved verse, for God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

I know you love this verse already. I want to help you love it a little bit more, okay? Even more of God's gracious heart than you've ever seen here. The world stands against God, separated from him by sin and rebellion, deservingly to die, so this, that this verse is talking about is God's love for the unlovely, the unlovable.

This is grace, right? God so loved the world, in other words, God loved the world in this way, like God did with the serpent in the wilderness, that even though they, the world, deserved to die, he would give new life as a gift to anyone, not just those with less venom in their veins, not as, not as bad off, not, no, no, not just those, what does it say?

Whoever, whoever would look to his son, God would in fact, this is amazing love, amazing grace, for this to happen, God would actually give his own son and watch him go to the cross and die. Maybe it didn't cost a lot to see a serpent put up on a pole, but God sends his own son to be lifted up on a cross to die so that those who believe in him, whoever believes in him, would have life. [23 : 33] And don't read eternal life there and think that you have to wait until you die for that. No, no, that's not what it's like.

God gives this life now. The word means the life of the age to come. True, abundant life in relationship with God, that's what makes it life, right?

It's a present reality here. It tastes of glory. It's life that looks to Jesus for comfort in every sorrow and disappointment. It's life that trusts Jesus for his guidance in every step of the journey and every decision that you make.

And it's life that continues forever, yes. It never ends, but it starts now when you are born again. That's the new life starting.

Born again from above by trusting Jesus. Your new life with God, the life that you were made for, the life that you will enjoy forever begins now and in that life the best is always yet to come.

[24 : 38] Never now will it be what it will be then, but it starts now because God has moved in. Heaven has come to you. Boundless love from the heart of God that the Son of God is not sent to condemn God's enemies.

That might have made sense. but to rescue them and make them sons. Verse 17, 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.

Listen, y'all, if the problem is that the thing we most need is the thing we can't do, the solution is as hopeful as that seems hopeless.

God does for us what we can't do for ourselves. He takes the death sentence that we were under so that we can be born again to new life.

A pastor friend of mine tells a tragic yet beautiful story that I've shared with you before. It's of two brothers playing together in a small town in Missouri.

[25 : 50] And one afternoon they rode their bikes down to the sandbanks by the river but soon got caught in really dangerous quicksand. When they didn't return home for dinner, their parents organized a search for the two boys and they went rushing all around, eventually saw the bikes and then they saw the younger brother up to his neck in sand.

They rushed over to him and as they freed him from the sand they said to him, where is your brother? He said, I'm standing on his shoulders.

The sacrificial death of the older brother was the only way to give life to the one he loved. And the sacrificial death of Jesus was the only way to give life to the world that God loved.

He entered into our condemnation, right? That we might stand on him and have his salvation. Our older brother gives his life to give us life and welcome us for the first time into the family.

Now as wonderfully simple as that is, to get what you most need as a gift by just trusting Jesus, just by standing on him, it is equally necessary.

[27 : 17] You must believe. Verse 18, whoever believes in him, his son, the son of God, is not condemned.

But whoever does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only son of God. Listen, there's plenty of condemnation to go around, right?

Remember how I said you must be born again? If you haven't entrusted yourself to the son of God, then you stand condemned. In fact, you are hiding from him in the dark.

This is the judgment. The light has come into the world and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light lest his deeds should be exposed.

But whoever does what is true comes to the light so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God. You've been hiding in the dark perhaps, but there is an invitation to the light, to life in the light.

[28 : 27] There may well be plenty of condemnation to go around when we stand on our own, but when we stand in the sun, there is none. Do you sometimes condemn yourself in your own thoughts?

Does Satan accuse you? Are the voices of condemnation around you really loud? If you trust Jesus, know that he came not to condemn you, but to save you.

No matter what those loud voices say, there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Amen? No condemnation.

Listen, Nicodemus, Jesus says. Listen, uncertain, confused, questioning friend. even if you don't have it all figured out yet.

It's being born again throwing you off. It may have happened to you and you didn't even realize that the spirit blew through your heart. Jesus is saying, go home considering this.

[29 : 42] Whoever believes in me is not condemned. Stick with me, Jesus says. Trust me to have it figured out when you don't.

It's why God sent me. Know that you can find life today, life forever in relationship with me. Friend, if you are looking to Jesus for life, you've found it.

If you have tasted his goodness and grace, then you will feast on it forever. It's his promise to you. What a great offer that is this morning to all of us to taste and know today of his love.

But if you're honest, maybe you're still not quite there. Maybe Jesus' answer sounds like all talk to you. I can relate to that.

We come to Jesus longing for hope, wanting to be made new, searching for life, and we come to Jesus and all he says is, trust me.

[30 : 50] If that's all it was, I'd say you'd be right to be skeptical. Anyone can say those words, right? People have said them to you before, trust me, and they've let you down and you're not about to be let down again.

Maybe you'll just keep looking for another way to avoid death and find real life. Jesus doesn't stop there.

He doesn't just give these words as an answer. Jesus' other answer to our questions backs up his words, and don't miss this. He is in essence here inviting Nicodemus to continue with him, to keep following after him as he walks in order to find that eternal, everlasting life.

And as Nicodemus does that, follows with him in one of the most widely attested events in all of human history, Jesus, in just a couple short years, dies on a Roman cross, being lifted up as he promised in agonizing death to offer everlasting life.

Nicodemus, by the way, is there and helps prepare Jesus' body for burial and place it in the tomb. I don't care if you've been in church one day, this is your first time, or if you've been in church for 90 years.

[32 : 19] Either way, I want to invite you to bring your questions and your uncertainties and your confusion all the way to the cross this morning.

To listen to the promises of Jesus, yes, to hear the good news of the new birth and the life that he offers to you that you could never afford for yourself, and then to see at the cross him take your death so that he can give you that new life with him today and forever.

Let's pray. God, your love must really be beyond our imagination. That you would sacrifice your beloved son for your sworn enemies.

Father, you know how I long for every person in here, for every soul in this room to know new birth and true life and unending joy and relationship with you, and so I ask that you would send your spirit that I can't control to give sight to our eyes, faith to our hearts, use these very common elements for that very special purpose that we would see your love in the broken body, in the shed blood, in the saving death of your son.

And we ask it in his name. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org. 1 oder northwood.org.

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