
LIFE IN HIS NAME

THE WHY

John 3:16-21

I would like to do something I don't typically do. I would like to go back and, if you will allow me, look at the passage that we looked at last week, beginning in verse 1 of John 3. I would like to read that and make a few comments so that we can connect the passage from last week to this week.

John 3:1-3:

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 was a teacher in Israel. He was well respected, well liked, very successful, prominent -- a moral, good man. He comes to Jesus under the cover of night, secretly, and he wants to know about eternal life. He wants to know about the kingdom of God, and Jesus confronts him with this bold statement: "Nicodemus, you must be born again." We continue in verses 4-8:

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. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Jesus explains to Nicodemus, "When I say that you need to be born again, I am telling you that you need life which comes from me. You need to be born of my Spirit. There is an activity where I come in and create my life in you." Jesus speaks of it as being born not of the flesh, but of the spirit of God and of water. He is speaking there of a cleansing, a washing of our souls, of our sin, and our guilt because of our sin, and of a new life, eternal life, spiritual life that we receive.

Nicodemus is perplexed by this still, and in verses 9-15 we read:

“How can these things be?” 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 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.

Jesus now launches into, really, a very aggressive mode. It seems confrontational. Jesus is saying, “Listen, if you don’t understand these things, how can you understand anything? Understand this: You may be a teacher in Israel, but I come to you in full authority from heaven. The only way to know the things that I am telling you about is if a man were to go up to heaven, get that truth, and come back, and that’s impossible. But I have come from heaven with the authority of my Father to deliver this message: Nicodemus, you must be born again.” So, we are confronted with this essential doctrine.

We hear much about what it means to be an evangelical Christian. It’s all in the news. We are talking about the evangelical vote and how evangelical Christians will vote. I was asked this week by a friend, “What does it mean to be an evangelical?” Obviously, some distinction is being made here between evangelical Christians and other Christians. Really, there are two essential characteristics to this term.

1. An evangelical believes the bible. He believes the bible is God’s word. There are Christians who use the bible. They claim to be Christians who use the bible. I am not judging their souls, but I want to make this distinction. They would read about the miracles of Jesus or certain portions and they say, “Okay, I don’t really believe that happened, even though the biblical author intends for me to believe that. I don’t believe it, and therefore perhaps there is a moral teaching for me here, but I reject, really, the validity of the scripture in terms of its own claims. So, the first aspect is that as evangelicals we believe that the bible is true.
2. Secondly, it speaks of one very important doctrine: It’s the doctrine of conversion. It’s the doctrine of regeneration. It is taught here in this passage and many other passages. It is precisely what Jesus is talking about when he says, “You must be born again.” You must have a conversion experience. It may not be a point in time that you can trace yourself or

your life experience to. It may have happened over a long period of time. You may even be unaware of that moment, but God came in and God changed you and God saved you.

We looked at this quote last week by Sinclair Ferguson. He calls this the most crucial doctrine of all. Do you remember this quote? I know you do. I know you remember everything that happens here on Sunday morning. "To have clear views here is to pave the way for all other doctrines of the Christian life. To mistake the way here, conversely will mean that the whole focus of our understanding is seriously at fault." He is saying that if you and I don't understand that to be a Christian fundamentally means that God has done something to you -- God has given you life -- God has saved you -- if that foundation is not there, then everything will be slightly off or significantly off in your spiritual journey. This paves the way for clear views on everything.

But this is the challenge with that doctrine, and this was Nicodemus' challenge and the reason why we review last week's message, because it sets us up so well for today. It leaves us in this passive place. You say, "Okay, Brian, you are telling us that John is teaching that the Spirit is like the wind. We can't control it. God saves us. It's not our work. It's the work of God. I am kind of paralyzed by that. What do I do? How can I be saved if it's the work of God and not my work?"

That's exactly the tension that Nicodemus is experiencing in the conversation with Jesus. That's what happens in verse 9 when he says for the third time, "How?" That's when Jesus begins to shift the conversation. In verses 9 through 15 he begins to tell him that there is a message that goes forth which tells about him so that you can believe in him. Do you remember how he did that? Do you remember the image he used from the Old Testament? Look at verses 14 and 15. I read it, but let's look at it again. He says, "...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."

Remember Numbers Chapter 21? The children of Israel were doing something you and I never do. They were grumbling. They were complaining. Now, their grumbling and complaining was severe. It reached a point where they were actually saying, "Moses, we are fed up. We are sorry you ever did this. We are sorry God ever brought us out of Egypt. We were better off in slavery than we are with you." And God brought judgment on them and fiery serpents came into the camp. Then the people immediately realized that this was not good and they repented. They came to Moses and said, "Sorry -- please help us!" When Moses prayed, something very significant happened. God

told Moses: “Fashion a serpent. Put it on a pole and erect it, and when the people look at it, they will be healed. The people that are bitten will be healed.”

We looked at this last week. This is contrary to biblical truth. This seems like idolatry. It seems like superstition that is forbidden. And yet, it was God in ancient times demonstrating the gospel to his people. It was a very simple message, a very vivid picture of the curse of sin. The serpent represents God’s judgment of sin. The snakes come into the camp. The curse of sin will be put upon Jesus as the perfect sacrifice. He will be lifted up on the cross, and when you look to him you will be healed of the curse. You will be healed of your sin and cleansed and born of the Spirit.

That is faith building, because you see that far before Jesus arrived, in hidden and less hidden ways, God was proclaiming one message: “You need to be saved. You need to be cleansed of sin. I am going to do it for you. There is a just judgment for sin, and I love you, and I will put it on my son so that you can be healed.”

Nicodemus was an Old Testament teacher and he immediately recognized that passage. We don’t know when, but we do know he eventually became a follower of Christ and things began to click. (All of that was introduction to the introduction, so get comfortable for just a moment.) We get to verse 16 and we now arrive at the most famous verse in the entire bible. I mean, this is the guy with the rainbow hair at the football game holding up John 3:16. Everywhere you go - tee shirts, bumper stickers: John 3:16, right?

I don’t want to disappoint you, but these are probably not the words of Jesus. We are almost surely moving away from the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus, and this is John’s explanation. This is John’s commentary. If that disappoints you, please don’t be disappointed, because it’s not less significant in any way that it’s the Holy Spirit speaking through John than it is if Jesus himself were to say these words. In fact, it probably helps us understand something very important.

John understands that you and I and many others will not put it all together when we hear this message about the serpent in the wilderness on a pole, and exactly what that means. We are not all Old Testament teachers, as was Nicodemus. So now John gives a very vivid, clear explanation of the message. Remember how we got here: You must be born again. It’s a birth of the Spirit. God does it. But wait - I feel like I don’t know what to do. I don’t understand this. It paralyzes me. I am waiting for God to move. Okay, there is a message to be declared, and as that Word of God, that

message – the gospel – goes forth, the Spirit of God gives life, raises the dead, and we are born spiritually.

There is a message that tells us about Jesus so that we might believe in Jesus and live. That is summarized in verse 16. John 3:16, our text for today: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Then John continues in 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. Whoever believes in him 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. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light lest his works should be exposed. But 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.

Verse 16 summarizes for us two parts of the message:

- I. “The What,” and
 - II. “The How.”
- I. Let’s start with “The What.” Essentially in verses 1-15, in the conversation with Nicodemus Jesus tells Nicodemus what it is he needs and how to get it. But now, John is making that vividly clear for you. Three things comprise “The What” in verse 16:
 1. The message is a message of God’s love -- “For God so loved the world...”
 2. The message is a message of God’s sacrifice – “...that he gave his only Son.”
 3. And the message is a message of God’s promise – “ that whoever believes in him might have eternal life.”

It’s a little bit easier to grab ahold of now than a serpent on a pole being lifted up -- Jesus lifted up on the cross. Now John explains that God loves you so much that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him will have eternal life. You have this purpose behind all of the expression of

God's love, this tremendous sacrifice accompanying that love, and the promise of eternal life. That is the message, the good news of John 3:16, and the message of the bible.

- II. So, if God gives this life, how do I receive it? How do I respond? It is very clear here in verse 16: "That whoever believes in him might have eternal life." We trust in Christ. We put our faith in him.

What? It is a message of God's love, God's sacrifice, and God's promise. How? We trust in him.

That's the second point, also in verse 16. In many ways verse 16 is John's summary of verse 1-15.

Are you with me? That provokes one big question, and that question is:

- III. Why? "Why, Brian, do I need to be saved, born again? Why, John, is this necessary?" Verses 17-21 answer this question, "The Why" question.

I want to confess to you that when I really launched in and started studying this passage, I found it to be very challenging. I found it to be a difficult passage. I don't know if as I read it you thought, "Hmmm...I'm not sure exactly what that means." You find with the gospel of John that there is a layer beneath a layer beneath a layer at times. John launches into this explanation of "Why" and here is what happens and why it's so difficult to tell you "Why." The moment John tells you why, you will want to change "The How" and "The What," because "The Why" is such a big "Why." That makes it completely clear to you, doesn't it? I'm going to say it again. The moment John tells you "The Why," you will want to change "The What" and "The How" because "The Why" is such a big "Why."

Alright, let's start. Why? Why do I need this message? Verse 17: "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

1. The world is lost.

Continuing in verse 18: "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the Son of God."

2. The world is condemned.

Verse 19: "And this is the judgment (or the condemnation -- same Greek word as condemnation): the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their

works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But 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.”

3. The world is in darkness.

Why? Short answer: We are lost, we are condemned, and we are in darkness. What does John mean by this? And why am I laboring the point to say that the moment you start to explain why, you are going to be tempted to reach back and twist “The What” and “The How”?

Why? Because John is not just saying you are lost, you are condemned, you are in darkness. He is saying you are more lost than you can imagine. You are so lost that you don’t know that you are lost and if you were to be told you are lost, you don’t want to be found.

When I tell you (I am now paraphrasing for John) that you are condemned, you don’t understand that the seriousness of that is that this cuts you off from the only one that can help you. You are in darkness to such an extent that you resist the light. You are more encased in darkness than you have ever imagined. If this seems like, “Brian, this is just brutal. This is severe. This is downright mean and unkind.” No. No, it’s a mercy of God to open our eyes to our spiritual condition and our need for salvation.

Did you ever have that moment with your mom where she was mad at you, but now she is really mad at you? Frequently, my mom would communicate that she was upset at me. There were varied things. My mom very seldom raised her voice, but if she raised her voice, I knew, “Oh wow, this is like a new level. I’m in trouble.” But if she raised her voice and then used my full name, including my middle name, it was “run for the door.”

How do you say to someone, “You are lost. No, you are really lost. No, you are more lost than you even think you are.” It’s very difficult for us to comprehend what scripture is saying about the condition of our hearts here. John, under the inspiration of God’s Spirit, does something here that’s just remarkable. This is what happens. Jesus comes as the light, and because we are not only in darkness, we love the darkness and we don’t want to come to the light. Because when we come to the light, whom we are gets exposed.

Ladies, some of you use a makeup mirror with really bright lights and it magnifies. You can see all those imperfections. Well, you can see an occasional imperfection. Right? Then you do what we

do - what? -- you cover it up. You hide it. Right? Then you go back into the darkness. I'm just finding a way to offend everybody this morning. That's my story and I'm sticking with it. We love the darkness.

Here is how Tim Keller explains it. Listen to this quote: "The gospel is news that creates a life of love, but the life of love is not itself the gospel." Hmm. What does he mean? He means that this message goes out and we are born again. We come to life. And we are transformed. We find the light attractive and we don't want the darkness. We want the light. He describes it in this quote as a life of love.

Remember when we read the quote about Wilberforce when "the great change" came in his life? How he began to think of others and consider others? All of a sudden people thought he was kind when previously he was irritable all the time. There was a transformation of character happening. But John's point is this: We are so lost in our sin that when we hear that lostness described, we don't want to come out into the light and be saved. What we want to do is reform ourselves. We want to get our act together. We want to be just moral, good people. We don't want to say, "I'm so lost I can't save myself."

So you have this distinction of evangelical Christians and others who would say you don't really even need to be saved. That's not an exception to the entire history of the world. This is God's challenge, if you will. The moment he begins to describe to us our condition, our need, we retreat further into it and farther away from him, because we don't like what it says about us.

Let's go back and look at verse 17. In light of the darkness coming into the light explanation, you begin to understand what John is saying. "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." He is saying in verse 17 that the world is already under the judgment of God. God made us. He holds us responsible for the gifts that he has given us. We have rebelled against God. There is a sentence of judgment. That is the prevailing, un-contradicted message of scripture.

Verse 18: "Whoever believes in him 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." That sounds like a circular argument to me. It sounds like you are saying the world is already condemned. The solution comes, and those that reject the solution are already condemned. But now when you put it with John's description of darkness and light, you see what he is saying, right? You see it, don't

you? What is he saying? You are condemned. You are lost and in darkness and under a sentence of judgment. You want proof of it? The proof of it is that when the solution comes, you run from it. It is proving that you are already in that condition. And now, your rejection of the light just sends you further into condemnation and darkness.

Friends, that is a very sobering message. It says first of all to you and me that when this message knocks on your door, you cannot afford to be indifferent about it. God requires that you examine the claims of Christ and boldly reject or accept. Indifference is taken by God as a denial.

If you are grabbing the spirit of this passage, you are thinking - I was thinking - "Okay, there is this challenge. We don't easily see our sin. We don't see it. It's a protective mechanism." We are Adam and Eve, right? We run for the fig leaves and we want to disguise our immorality and put on our best face. The challenge then is for God to bring us to a place of helping us see our need. How does God do that? Now you understand why Jesus begins with Nicodemus: "You must be born again." You need a work of God's grace in your life so profound, and yet so wonderful!

Once you see the description of our need and how we are in this dark place, God comes, and we just blame him all the more. We go further and further into darkness, and God says, "I love you so much, I am going to pay the penalty for that extreme darkness and give my Son on a cross so that you can see him as the light of the world, and come to that light and be saved and be born anew!" That is extravagant love! "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." It's powerful.

Are you seeing how this doctrine informs everything else? I guess it was a rhetorical question, but let me ask: "Are you seeing?" Yeah. Consider another quote here by Tim Keller: "The power of the gospel comes in two movements. It first says, "I am more sinful and flawed than I ever dared believe." But then he quickly follows with, "I am more accepted and loved than I ever dared hope."

That's the paradox of Christianity. If you are here today and you are not a Christian, there is this point where Christ says to you, "Come as you are -- the mess that you are. Come out of the darkness, into the light. Just be yourself before God." There is that embracing, receiving side. And then there is the confrontational, challenging side. "But you will not stay as you are. Give me your heart. Give me your life. I will transform you and I will be the Lord of your life. It will be a lifelong journey of you learning to come out of darkness into light."

Consider this long quote from John Newton. He wrote this in a letter to Hannah More. Hannah More helped William Wilberforce in the goal of abolishing the slave trade in Britain in the late 1700's and early 1800's. John Newton, author of "Amazing Grace," was captain of a slave ship, got saved, and became a pastor - dramatic story. This is what he writes to Hannah More: "As sinners, the first things we need are pardon, reconciliation and a principle of life and conduct entirely new." He is describing there the new birth. There is that cleansing and the work of the Spirit. He calls it "a principle of life and conduct that's entirely new."

We are deeply changed as the truth of God and the Spirit of God come into us, permeating deep down into our hearts. Now we live by the life of God, but we have a certain understanding of the conduct that God requires. It's a work of salvation. "Until then, we can have no more success or comfort from our endeavors than a man who should attempt to walk while his ankle was dislocated. The bone must be reduced before he can take a single step with safety or attempt it without increasing his pain." To try to reform ourselves and to do better and get some comfort and live right is ridiculous, Newton is saying. It's like a man whose ankle is completely out of joint and he is trying to walk on it while it's still lame.

For these purposes, we are directed to Jesus Christ, as the wounded Israelites were to look at the brazen serpent (John 3:14-15). When we understand what the scripture teaches of the person, love, and offices of Christ, the necessity and final causes of his humiliation unto death, and feel our own need of such a savior, we then know him to be the light, the sun of the world, and of the soul; the source of all spiritual light, life, comfort, and influence; having access to God by him, and receiving out of his fullness grace for grace.

Do you see what he is saying? He is saying that God comes in. There is a new principle of life, a new way to live. I am healed. But what's happened is, this message has come in and I have seen the magnitude of my need. The humiliation that Christ suffered on the cross was my humiliation, and it points to the depth of my need, but not only that - to his glory - the light and life of God! He is the light, not just of the universe, but of my soul! As I look to him -- this is just a beautiful description of the dual nature of repentance and faith -- I am walking out of the darkness, but in order to do that, I need to come to the light.

It's like that image of the bicycle. One pedal is up, then you push it down, then the other one comes up. I need to repent. I need to confess my sin. I am back here in the darkness. Lord,

forgive me. I am pressing that down. But sometimes, when I am honest with myself and I get a real look at my soul, it's overwhelming. My own need is overwhelming. But this other pedal comes up which tells me to look to Christ and live, because he is a sufficient sacrifice for your sin. Sometimes that's the rhythm of the Christian life. It is not negative. It's glorious. It's this glorious process of sanctification.

In my own life, one of the means of that was struggling in my own marriage. Early in our marriage we had a very difficult time, as you have heard our testimony. We can make jokes about it and say, "Well, it just took Beth a while to sort me out." I suppose in one sense that was true, but there was a revelation in that of selfishness and pride in my own heart. There was a moment (I remember it vividly to this day) five years into our marriage, where here I am - a pastor, trying to help other people in their marriages -- and I began to get a glimpse of it. That day was not a dreadful day, though it was ugly. It was a day of life. The moment you see it and admit it and come out of the darkness, it's washed away. I am going to tell you, I cannot explain this to you completely, but I can tell you that that moment in time, after five years of struggle, that instant our marriage changed.

Now, a lot of change needed to happen, a lot of growth needed to happen. Here is the point I want to make. You are going to find this so hard to believe. Even this week, I snapped at my wife. I did. She may have deserved it just a little bit. I say, we say to one another all the time, "Please forgive me." It's the glory of the gospel.

You know, in that moment you can turn and run back into the darkness and justify your irritability and your sin and your pride. There is always ammunition on the other side. "But you did this, and you did that, and..." You know, we have 30 years of ammunition against one another. We have been together a while, and her memory is better than mine. Do you see it? You can just run back and attack, and keep sending missiles. Or you can just say, "Yeah -- I need you, Lord. I need you. Here I am."

Now it's even more ridiculous. I'm in my fifties! I'm a pastor! I have experienced your grace over and over! Yeah. That is what John means when he says, "You are lost. You are condemned. You are in darkness. And I have come to save you." You learn, and you shorten that time between your sin and the moment you admit it and repent, because it's glorious, right? We are cleansed.