

If I asked you what is the most famous verse in the Bible, you would probably say John 3:16; many of us can quote it from memory. It was one of the first verses that most of us learned in Sunday School. I think we can safely say that this is the heart of the gospel; the reason Jesus came to live among us. In the third chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus shared these wonderful words with us during a conversation one night with the Pharisee Nicodemus. Listen to this discussion in verses 1 through 17.

Read John 3:1-17

I have often referred to this story as “Nick at Night.” Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a wealthy and highly educated man, a man of power who was a member of the Sanhedrin, a court of seventy men who served as the Supreme Court of the Jews. Nicodemus was both a religious and political leader of the Jews. But while most of the other religious authorities opposed Jesus and were plotting to kill Him, something was stirring deep inside the heart of Nicodemus; somehow Jesus’ words and actions had touched him. Nicodemus knew all the Old Testament scriptures and was familiar with the theology of his time. But something was missing in his life; there was a hunger down deep in his heart that all the Jewish laws and religious practices could not satisfy. This young Teacher from Nazareth had struck a nerve in Nicodemus and aroused his curiosity.

So, in order not to be seen, Nicodemus came in the night searching for the truth; he came searching for God. And in Jesus Christ, he found both. That’s the reason Jesus came into the world – to show us the truth and to show us who God really is. Each person has a favorite Bible verse, but John 3:16 has been called “Everybody’s text.” It may be the most quoted Bible verse of all time. In reality, the very essence of the gospel can be summed up in not only verse 16, but also the following verse 17: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son so that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life. For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.” That’s the gospel in a nutshell; that’s why Jesus came to die on an old wooden cross for you and for me. The meaning of Christmas, Easter, and God’s plan for salvation are all wrapped up in these two simple but beautiful verses.

If you want a condensed version of the Bible, and if you want one verse to pin your hopes on, you cannot pick a better verse than John 3:16. While it does not disclose all the information in the Bible, it does identify three great themes of the Bible: 1) God so loved the world that He sent His only Son; 2) God’s love comes to us as a gift; and 3) God promises that if we believe, we will have everlasting life.

This verse tells us certain things. First, God took the initiative in bringing us salvation. The Hallmark greeting card slogan: “When you care enough to send the very best,” can be applied to God’s gift of love; God thought enough of us to send His very best – He sent His only Begotten Son because He loved us. At the heart of everything is the love of God. It also tells us that the essence of God’s being is love. God, like the Father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son that we discussed two weeks ago, cannot be happy until all His wandering children have come home. This verse also shows us the width of God’s love. Notice that the passage says “God so loved the world;” not one particular race, people, or denomination. He loves us all; every person has access to God’s love. St. Augustine said that “God loves each of us as if there is only one of us to love.” If you had to pick one word to describe God, I believe it would be love.

When the brilliant Swiss theologian Karl Barth was asked by a group of young theologians what was the most important theological fact that he had discovered during his lifetime of studies, the old scholar puffed silently on his pipe as he thoughtfully pondered the question. The students were silent, breathless with anticipation. Finally, he removed his pipe, paused, and simply said: “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so!”

In this verse, the phrase “so loved” may not mean “loved so much” but “loved in this way;” that is, God’s love is giving and with a purpose – to rescue and give life. God so loved the world in this way, by giving His best, His Son. C. S. Lewis wrote: “In awful and surprising truth, we are objects of God’s love ... not because we are lovable but because He is love; not because He needs to receive but because He delights to give.” The key word in verse 16 is “love;” while the key word in verse 17 is “save.” As we have discussed before, God gave us the amazing gift of free will; however, humanity has used this gift to drift farther and farther away from God over the centuries. So, God sent His Son to show us the way back to Him.

We must remember that God will never give up on us because He loves us so much. Genesis 1:27 notes that we were created in the image of God. We were created for a companionship with God, for a personal relationship with Him. But while we abandoned Him, He has never abandoned us and even sent His Son to re-establish this relationship so that we may have eternal life with Him.

And in verse 14, Jesus gives a hint as to how this salvation was going to be accomplished. Jesus referred to the story from the Old Testament found in Numbers 21:4-9. As Moses was leading the Israelites across the wilderness to the Promised Land, they had become impatient because they didn’t think that Moses was taking the quickest and most direct route. Sounds a lot like our kids, doesn’t it? I know you have heard it before – “are we there yet; are we there yet?” The Israelites were second guessing Moses and complaining about the lack of water and the quality of the food that the Lord was providing. So, the Lord sent poisonous snakes among them and many of them died when they were bitten. As was their wishy-washy nature, the

Israelites quickly found religion again and asked God to take the snakes away. So, God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Whenever an Israelite was bitten, they could look to the snake and be healed.

Do you see the similarities? In the Old Testament, God used something repulsive, unwanted, and rejected, an image of a poisonous snake, to heal the Israelites. Then at the proper time, God choose an old rugged, cross on which His Beloved Son died so that the entire world could also receive healing, in addition to forgiveness and salvation. The point of this illustration is that as healing came to the snake-bitten Israelites by looking at the bronze serpent on a pole, so life is given to those who look up with eyes of faith upon the cross on which the Son of God died for their sins.

The point is that whenever people of faith are tempted to look down, to look around and complain like the Israelites about what's wrong in their lives, the church, and the country, God calls on us to look up to Him. We are called to focus on God, and to trust in His empowering love and word. The message is "look up; look to the cross."

Nicodemus came to see Jesus in the darkness of night seeking the truth and the light. With all his education and religious training, something was missing in his relationship with God. However, Jesus' answer in verse 3 surprised him: "No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born again." Jesus introduced Nicodemus and us to a new way of thinking, a new way to a personal relationship with God. We must be "born again," not physically, but spiritually.

The term "born again" can stir many different emotions within us depending on our religious up-bringing and background. To some it may be as offensive as someone coming up to you and asking if you have been saved. I know that I never heard the term much when I was growing up although I later found an old book entitled *What Every Methodist Should Know* which states: "Methodists have preached from the beginning that you must be born again." Did you know that?

But what does it mean to be "born again?" For me, it is acknowledging my sin, accepting Jesus Christ into my heart, and surrendering my life to Him. It is a transformation, putting off the old self with all its bad habits and desires, and trying to develop new Christ-like habits. Notice, I said trying. It is a day-by-day effort to become the person God created us to be. When we are born again, we should "live so that the preacher won't have to lie at our funeral." To be born anew is to undergo such a radical change that it like a new birth; it is to have something happen to the soul which can only be described as being born all over again, and this is not accomplished by our own efforts, but by the grace and power of God. Being born again by the Spirit is an unmistakable work of God, as mysterious as the wind, and as surprising as God

Himself. 1 Peter 1:3 states: "God has given us new birth. You have been born anew into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

Jesus said that we are born of water and the Spirit. Water is the symbol of cleansing, washing away all our previous sins. When Jesus takes possession of our lives, and when we love Him with all our heart, our sins are forgiven and forgotten. However, if this was all that there was, we would continue to do the same bad things over and over, and continue to make a mess of our lives. But Jesus also promises us the power of the Holy Spirit which enables us to be what by ourselves we could never be, and to do what by ourselves we could never do. Water and the Spirit stand for the cleansing and strengthening power of Christ, which wipes out the past and gives victory in the future. Remember that every sinner has a future and every saint has a past!

One day an ugly caterpillar climbs into a tree and spins a silky robe around itself. It goes to sleep, and in a few weeks emerges a beautiful butterfly. So, we, discouraged, unhappy, hounded by guilt, confused, depressed, and vainly looking for escape – can come by faith to Christ and emerge a new person. We can be born again. I know that it sounds incredible, even impossible, and yet that is precisely what happens. Remember, all things are possible with God, even changing some of us!

One of my favorite movies is Forrest Gump. There's a scene in the movie where Lt. Dan asks Forrest if he had found Jesus yet. Forrest replies that he was supposed to be looking for Him. Many people are fortunate like Forrest to have known Christ all their lives; however, there are just as many or more who only know Him through Sunday School lessons, sermons, or historical books, but have never experienced a personal relationship with Him. Like Nicodemus, they are searching in the dark of night for Him, looking for the Light. Have you found Him? Are you as confident as Forrest in your relationship with Jesus?

The good news is that we don't have to sneak out in the night or go to some far away mountaintop to find Jesus Christ. All we have to do is turn around. He is right there beside you, waiting for you to call His name. How do I know? Because the Bible tells me so right here in the sixteenth verse. God says: "I love so much that I sent My Son to die for you so that you could experience My love for you." Hear the Good News - God loves; Jesus saves! That's the reason that He came. Don't let another day go by without experiencing His love and presence in your life. Amen