



November 11, 2012
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*All Things New:
New Birth
John 3: 1-21*

Good morning Chapel Hill! I've just got back from a two-week break in England and it's so great to be back home in Gig Harbor. I've been keeping a close eye on the news whilst I've been away, and it has been an interesting week... I'm sure some of you are overjoyed at this week's results, whilst others are struggling somewhat.

Whichever way you voted, (and for the record, I'm not allowed to vote) we want you to know that you are welcome here at Chapel Hill. We are a church that believes God is in control of history and will work all things together for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose. We believe that whoever is President, and whatever laws are passed, that God has all things in hand, and we can trust him for the outcome.

I also want to pay tribute to our veterans this morning. November 11 is also a special day in the UK, where we remember those who have fought for our freedom and we wear poppies as a sign of our remembrance. And I know that our freedom has been largely dependent upon our alliance with the USA. For your service to this country, and in turn to my own country, I am incredibly grateful. Thank you.

Today we are going to be looking at one of the most famous verses in the Bible. It even made it into a 2011 Super Bowl commercial. Did you see this one?

[Play Video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRCZkGshQGc>]

Did you see that one? You didn't? Well, that's because Fox didn't want to air it on the basis that it contained religious doctrine... Nonetheless, John 3: 16 isn't just on the sports field—it's everywhere. Forever 21 prints it on the bottom of their bags. In-N-Out Burger prints it on their cups. Some of us even have it memorized. But do we really know what it means? Or the context in which it comes?

We're in the middle of a series called 'All Things New' looking at chapters 2-4 of John's gospel. The past two messages have been all about how the old Jewish system of doing things is inadequate for what we need—that what we really need is Jesus. Today, we're going to meet a man named Nicodemus who comes to

Jesus expecting to talk theology. But Jesus has other ideas... Let's take a read of John 3: 1-21.

[Scripture Text]

Nicodemus is kind of an important guy. Verse 1 tells us about him—take a look. He was a Pharisee; the Pharisees were the strictest, most externally obedient to the laws of scripture, most earnest group of Jews. He was also, a member of the Jewish ruling council—sometimes called the Sanhedrin. They were the ones who were charged with making sure that the faith of the Jews kept on the right track. Later, in verse 10, Jesus even calls him Israel's teacher. So... He's kind of a big deal. If anyone was qualified to know what the Scriptures taught, if anyone was qualified to be a good human being, if anyone was qualified to be in good relationship with God—Nicodemus was your man. So here's Nicodemus. And what does he do, verse 2:

He came to Jesus at night...

Kind of a strange detail to include? Well... as Pastor Mark has been telling us, every other word in John's gospel is packed with meaning, and this is another. John is obsessed with light and darkness. Right back in chapter 1 verse 5 he told us: "The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it." John uses this theme throughout, and the light always has positive connotations and darkness or nighttime has negative connotations. So Nicodemus comes at night, in physical darkness, which represents the spiritual darkness of his life—Nicodemus is in spiritual darkness. But he comes to Jesus, who is the Light, as we found out in chapter 1. He comes, in his darkness, to the light.

And he begins his conversation with Jesus in a courteous Middle Eastern fashion—opening with a compliment.

"Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

A delightful opening comment there from Nick. But look at how Jesus responds:

"In reply Jesus declared, 'I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.'"

What? Where did that come from? Think about it... Nicodemus comes to Jesus. He starts his conversation by paying him a compliment and then Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." Nicodemus is left going: what just happened?

What Jesus is doing is so clever... Normally, when a man of Nicodemus' stature and reputation comes to Jesus, he comes with a question, and most of the time, it

is to catch Jesus out, to try and show off. Two weeks ago we saw the Jews came to Jesus as he was overturning the tables in the temple and said: "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" Basically: "Who do you think you are Jesus? Prove to us how you have the authority to turn these tables!"

But just as Nicodemus is ready to come in with a killer question... Jesus throws a curveball. In cricket—which is the better, British equivalent of baseball—we call it a bouncer. You intentionally throw the ball short so it bounces up so high it hits the batter in the head. This is what Jesus does—he intentionally dis-orient Nicodemus. And Nicodemus is caught off guard. He's expecting him to reply with a "Why thank you. It's nice to meet you." But instead, he gets hit in the helmet with a 100 mph cricket ball—he's all over the place. Look at what he says in verse 4:

"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

"Jesus, what are you talking about? This is crazy talk!" Nicodemus thinks Jesus is talking about being physically born again. And he's right—it's not possible to be physically born again. But he's so dis-oriented that he misses the double meaning in Jesus' word again. The word again can also mean from above. Jesus isn't talking about a physical birth. He's talking about being born from above. Now Jesus has got Nicodemus listening, he carries on. Look down at verse 5:

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.

Jesus is talking about birth, but another way to talk about it might be our origins. We are fascinated as a generation with our family history—where have we come from? A relative of mine drew up a family tree that is so big you need a wall the size of one of those big red London buses to display it! Even then the writing is like a size 8 font! It's huge!!

Our culture loves thinking about origins. Even the latest James Bond film—Skyfall—is all about James Bond's origins—where he came from. And John—the writer of this gospel—loves origins too. Right back at the beginning of chapter 1 he tells us about Jesus' origins. In the beginning was the Word... And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. We find out that Jesus is the Eternal Son of God, and that he came to earth and became a human—that he moved into the neighborhood.

And here we have Jesus telling Nicodemus that his origins are all wrong. Nicodemus is a Pharisee—which we mentioned earlier. And they are sure that they know who God is, who matters to God, and how you get right with God. As far as

they were concerned, every person who was born a Jew, and didn't deny the Jewish faith, would enter the kingdom of God. Basically, the way to heaven was to be born a Jew.

But Jesus is saying that that is not the requirement to enter God's kingdom. That to enter God's kingdom you must be born again. In other words, he's saying to Nicodemus, "You can't get there from here. Where you are, where you have come from, it just can't get you into God's kingdom. You need to start over. You need a new origin. You need a new birth." Jesus dis-oriented Nicodemus, and now he is trying to completely re-orient Nicodemus. He's rocking Nicodemus' world, and look at all Nicodemus can say in verse 9:

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

I don't think Nicodemus is the only one who is confused. How many of those here today that call themselves Christians really understand this new birth that Jesus is talking about? Some of us think we do... But do we really?

In verse 8 Jesus likens the new birth to the wind. We often try to pin being "born again" down to a particular moment, or a particular experience—"I was born again on April 23 1972." But the truth is, it is just like the wind. We see it blowing the leaves, but we don't know where it comes from, or where it is going. We can't create a formula for being born again. And the reality is, not everyone who prays what we often call "the sinner's prayer" enters God's kingdom.

This may seem shocking to some of you, but it's the truth. As someone who is passionate about seeing people come to know Jesus, it is a hard truth that I have to deal with. My own cousin prayed the sinner's prayer, went on a missions trip, even helped lead the youth group at his church, but now he wants nothing to do with the church and doesn't believe in Jesus. Some people pray the sinner's prayer, but are not born again—it is not some magic formula!

But Jesus tells us that we can see the *effects* of the wind when it blows. We can know if someone is born again, because we see the effects of it—we see the Spirit at work in someone's life. I've seen several people this year be "born again." I've no idea when it has happened, and I'm not sure they do either. But I've seen the effects. They have this joy in them that nothing can quench.

They start completely changing their lives—they get set free from addictions, they start loving people in a different way, they become more and more like Jesus every day. And I'm asking myself: when did they say the sinner's prayer? But Jesus says it doesn't matter! We can see the wind blowing! Who care's where it has come from!?

So Nicodemus asks Jesus, how can this be? Let's drop down to verse 14 for the crux of Jesus' answer:

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

There it is. John 3:16. The central verse of this sermon by Jesus. Perhaps the central verse of John's gospel. Maybe even the central verse of the whole of the Bible. If it is not underlined, it should be. Even in your pew Bibles. No! I'm just joking. Don't underline in your pew Bibles! I'll get in trouble.

Do you know what is interesting though? That little word "so"—"For God so loved..." We often think it means God loved the world so much. But the word for "so" in the Greek isn't about the amount God loved the world, but the way in which God loved the world. Really John 3:16 could begin "For in this way God loved the world..." And that word "so" actually refers back to what has just been said—to verses 14 and 15.

Now don't get me wrong, God's act of sending his Son does show how much God loves the world, but that wasn't what Jesus said. Really, to understand John 3:16 we have to understand John 3:14-15. Look at them again:

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

Jesus is talking about a story that we find in chapter 21 of the book of Numbers, right at the beginning of the Old Testament. There we find the people of Israel, who have just been brought out of slavery, and are now wandering around in the wilderness, grumbling. They say, "Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness. There is no food and no water, and we hate this manna stuff! It tastes like cardboard... No. They didn't say that last bit."

So God sends some snakes among the people, and if a snake bit you, you died. Then the people come to their leader—Moses—and say they are sorry for grumbling—I bet!—and they ask Moses to ask God to fix it. So Moses prays and God gives him a solution. He says, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." And that's what happens. Moses puts up this pole with a snake on it, and if you got bitten, you looked at the pole and... you didn't die.

Now some of you may think that sounds a bit ridiculous right? But Jesus believed it happened. And more importantly, do you see what Jesus is telling us? When he says, "this is how God loved the world" in verse 16, he is telling us that it is just like God loved the people of Israel back in the wilderness over 1000 years earlier. He is telling us that we, the world, are snake-bit, just like the people of Israel.

We may not be physically dying, but we feel the effects of the deathly snake-bite in other ways. We live as if who we are is dictated by how we feel, so when sadness or depression hits, it's like we are dying inside. We live as if our relationships—our spouses, our boyfriends and girlfriends, our children—will provide everything we need, and then when they let us down, our world crumbles apart—divorce, teen suicide, broken homes. We live as if money and possessions are god, and then when recession comes, and we are struggling to maintain the lifestyle we are used to, we feel like we have lost everything. We are all snake-bit. And unless we find the cure, we will never experience true life.

We need a lifted-up snake on a pole that we can gaze upon, and Jesus tells us right here who that will be—Himself. Jesus will be lifted up, not in a dignified way, not like the King that he is, but in the form of a cursed and damned man, Luther even says, in the form of a snake, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

Now, we have John 3:16: *“For God so (that is, in this way, in this lifted up upon a cross, dying so that we may have life, way) loved the world, and gave his one and only Son, that whoever (any person, from anywhere, no matter what you’ve done, no matter who you’ve been, no matter how you feel, whoever) believes in him (not understands everything about him, not does good works for him, just believes in him, just trusts in him, just trusts in what he has done) shall not perish (shall never again be separated from God, from His love) but shall have eternal (not starting when we die, but starting today, deep, thirst-quenching, everlasting) life!”*

That is the message of John 3:16. We are all like the Israelites. We have all rejected God because he didn't give us what we wanted. We wanted the Promised Land—the milk, the honey, the good things in life—and instead, God gave us the wilderness—the striving, the pain, the hurt. And we blame God. We grumble and complain and reject Him. “I've been a good person, I've tried to do good things, I've been to church, but it's just not working. I'm still hurting, and it's all your fault. So I'm gonna go my own way. I think I can do a better job without you.” We all do this. And because of that, because we reject God, we are all snake bit.

But God does not leave us there. He gives his one and only Son. He sends his son to rescue us. And he does this by lifting him up—in the same way that Moses lifted up a snake on a pole—God lifts up his Son for us upon the cross. So that whoever believes in Him, whoever trusts in Him and what He has done, will not perish, but have deep, satisfying, everlasting life.

So what does this mean for you? There are some here who know that God is calling you to believe in Him today for the first time. Maybe you've never heard this before, maybe you've never understood it, but you know you have to respond, that you're snake-bit and you need rescuing. Well I want to give you the opportunity to respond in a minute.

But for a lot of us, we are pretty sure we got born again a while ago. I don't know when it was for me, but I know that I am born again. So aren't we sorted? We can just skip this out and jump straight to the second half of the chapter, right?

The danger for those of us who know that we are saved is that we forget that we are totally reliant upon God. We rely upon ourselves. That's what Nicodemus was doing. He would read his Bible every day, pray every day, and attend Synagogue every week. He didn't rely upon God, but upon Himself.

I catch myself doing it all the time. I go into important conversations with friends or colleagues thinking: "I got this, I can do this, I don't need to bother praying and asking God to give me words, I know what I'm going to say." Or I look at my marriage and say: "This is going pretty well. I won't bother asking God how I could love Rachel more. I've got it covered." Or I read the Bible and think: "For God so loved the world... Yeah, yeah, yeah... I learned that one back in elementary school. Got it covered. Probably don't need to go over that again."

The truth is, I have not got it covered. I am arrogant and proud. I think that somehow I fully understand how wide and how long and how high and how deep the love of God is. That somehow I already know what Jesus would do in this or that situation. That somehow I know better than God. But I don't.

This passage and in particular verse 16 should bring us to our knees before the God of the universe who loves us. Christ lifted up on the cross, taking the form of a cursed man, should show us just how lost we are, and just how much God loves us. And if this doesn't bring us to our knees every time we hear it, then we haven't fully understood it. The love of God for this world is something that we will never be able to plumb the depths of, but it is something that we should meditate on every single day.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Sermon Questions

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **DIG DEEPER**

1. Can you relate to Nicodemus? How are you relying upon your works to gain favor with God?
2. Do you agree with Ellis when he says verse 8 tells us that not everyone who prays the sinner's prayer enters God's kingdom? How does this relate to the parable of the sower in Mark 4: 1-9, 14-20?
3. Read the passage about the snake on a pole in Numbers 21:4-9. Consider the parallel that Jesus is talking about in John 3: 14-15 and discuss what similarities and differences you can see in the two situations.
4. How are you living as if you don't need God? What changes do you need to make?