

**Prayer:** Father, we thank you for your word, for the voice of Jesus as he speaks to us in scripture. Open our eyes, ears, hearts, and minds to hear, receive and respond to you this day. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

*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. (John 3:16)*

This would have to be the most well-known scripture from the bible. One of the few verses I know by memory, and I hope you do too! It is an amazing, masterly, moving summary of the gospel in terms of God's love for us.

It is often quoted and used in isolation, but today we are going to be looking at it in context of a larger section of scripture.

If we look at the beginning of John chapter 3, verse 2, we see that this verse 16, answers Nicodemus' question or rather his statement... *"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him"*.

I think behind this statement Nicodemus is wanting to ask Jesus, "Who are you?"

And in verse 16 Jesus is clearly talking about himself as God's one and only Son who has come to save the world...

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a member of the Jewish ruling council. A learned Jew with many impressive credentials. However, he was perhaps a bit confused, bemused, unsure who this man Jesus was. He came to try and find some answers; he came at night. Maybe because he couldn't get close to Jesus during the day, or more likely he didn't want to be seen with Jesus in broad daylight. Jesus and his followers were not necessarily the kind of people Pharisees would be hanging out with!

But Nicodemus was curious, he saw something Godly in Jesus. We don't hear his final response after Jesus goes off on a longer discourse, but it seems he went away pondering. In John Chapter 7 we read of Nicodemus defending Jesus for a fair hearing and in chapter 19, it is Nicodemus who goes with Joseph of Arimathea to lay him in a tomb with spices according to Jewish burial customs.

Nicodemus stands apart from the other Pharisees, and respected Jesus. Did he come to believe that Jesus really was the Son of God?

Let's return to the short conversation Nicodemus had with Jesus this night that he sought him out.

As Jesus is wont to do his response to Nicodemus' statement in verse 3 is quite strange, cryptic and obviously confusing for Nicodemus.

*"Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."*

At this stage Nicodemus is not at all understanding Jesus who is speaking metaphorically. Nicodemus is thinking literally and so naturally questions how someone can be born again! They cannot re-enter their mother's womb...That would be absurd. Our new granddaughter is already too big at 2 months old to go back into her mother's womb!

Jesus is not talking about physical, but spiritual birth. He says to see and enter the Kingdom of God you must be born of the water and Spirit. Young and old alike.

Jesus could assume that learned Nicodemus would perhaps make a connection here to the words of the prophet Ezekiel. From Ezekiel chapter 36, verses 25-26 we read this;

*I will sprinkle clean water on you and you'll be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.*

Jesus is saying that day has come, he has come to give us a new spirit!

Entry into the Kingdom of God does not depend on race, or circumcision or energetic keeping of the law, acts of piety (good works) or knowledge of scripture. Rather, one must be born again in the Spirit. A supernatural birth that cannot be fully explained, it is beyond human knowledge, but like Jesus' illustration of the wind, we experience its effects.

Nicodemus still doesn't understand how this can be, so Jesus explains further.

He again refers to the Old Testament, giving the example of how Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.

In Numbers 21 we read how the grumbling Israelites were punished by God, sending a plague of fiery serpents. Many died. They begged for mercy and God told Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it up on a pole. Whoever looked at the serpent was saved from the deadly snakes. They were given new life as they looked up.

The bronze snake was just a symbol, it extended the Israelites life only for that time, for they would later die a physical death, but Jesus says if we look upon and put our trust in him, we are given new and eternal life. We are born again.

God sent Jesus that we may have abundant life, now and forever.

He sent Jesus to be 'lifted up' on a pole, or a cross, to die, that our sins may be forgiven. That we may be cleansed, washed clean. He was then 'lifted up' as he was raised on the third day, conquering death, so that we may live. He then ascended into heaven and sent his Holy Spirit to live in us, giving us full and abundant life, filling us with his very self.

God sent his Son so that the world would be saved through him. For he **so** loved the world. We see here the depth of God's unfathomable love as he sent his most precious son to die. He could not love us more.

Nicodemus perhaps couldn't understand all that Jesus was saying to him on this nightly visit, he believed that Jesus came from God because of the signs he had done, but he didn't yet believe Jesus was **the Son** of God. But as John explains at the end of his gospel (chapter 20) the signs were so *that you (we) may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you (we) may have life in his name*. Perhaps as Jesus was lifted on the cross, the light dawned on Nicodemus, and he came to believe.

God's love was not just for the chosen 'Israelites', but for the world. God made the way for all who believe in Jesus to have eternal life.

Nicodemus and all the descendants of Abraham thought they had a special privilege of being in God's chosen family. But as we heard in our Romans 4 reading, Abraham was saved through faith, by God's grace alone.

That is how we are all saved. Through faith and grace alone.

In the beginning of John's gospel chapter 1, we read how Jesus...*came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to **all** who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, children born not of natural descent nor of human decision or a husband's will but born of God.*

We are born again, as we believe in Jesus, as we receive the grace he offers us. We are born into God's family, we become children of God!

That is what Jesus is talking about as he tells Nicodemus that he must be born again. His natural descent is not enough, that is not what is going to save him. He must believe that Jesus is the Son of God and put his faith in him. What is your faith in?

Do we think we are saved by coming to Church every week, or because our parents believed and sent us to Sunday School? Do we think it is because of our good works, giving to the Church, serving on the roster? These are good things, but they do not ensure we have eternal life.

Jesus may be cryptic in some of his conversations, but he is very clear here, which is why John 3:16 is so powerful. *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*. We must believe in God's son.

God's greatest desire is to save the world. The whole world. He goes on to say that Jesus was not sent to condemn, but to save the world, the world that did not love God.

He came to save the most unlikely sinner; he offers a way for all to come into his family and be transformed into his likeness, living new life.

I recently heard a young evangelist say they like to tell people the 'bad news' first, explain that they are sinners, and then explain that Jesus died for them to be forgiven. Jesus tells us to go and share the good news...that God so loves them that he sent his son Jesus. As they believe in Jesus and are reborn, God will send his Spirit to transform them.

The apostle Paul was a pharisee who thought he was saved through his Israelite ancestry, his circumcision and following the law. He did not believe in Jesus. He persecuted and put to death those who were Jesus followers.

And yet God did not condemn him, he saved him. When Paul was blinded by the light on the road to Damascus one day, he was then given new spiritual eyes and new birth in Christ. Paul speaks much of this new life in his letters. In 2 Corinthians 5 he says, *if anyone is in Christ the new creation has come. The old has gone the new is here!* In Ephesians 4 he says we are to put off our old self, being *made new in the attitude of our minds; And to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*

As we believe in Jesus, he calls us to follow him and live new and abundant life, walking in the Spirit.

God so loves us; he sent his son to die for us. This is not a gift to be taken lightly. It is a gift of grace he offers and longs for us to receive.

Do you believe, have you received? Are you born again into God's family?

As the Israelites were physically saved by looking upon the bronze serpent, may you look upon Jesus on the cross **and** in his glory now ascended in heaven and put your faith in him, being spiritually saved.

Lent is a time to reflect on our faith journey with Jesus. Maybe it's a time to renew your faith and accept God's love and grace afresh in his Son Jesus Christ.

Maybe it's time to be spiritually reborn.

Let us pray:

Father God, we thank you for your amazing and unfathomable love for us in sending your one and only Son to die that we might have eternal life. Help us not to take that new life for granted, or only think of it in terms of life after death. Help us to receive new life today, to be born again, to be filled with your Holy Spirit. Help us to live in your grace every day as new creations. Help us to love others as you love us and point them to look upward to see and receive also. I pray this in the precious name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.