

The Bible in One Year Week 17: Nicodemus (John Pt. 2)

(John 3:1-21)

- **Googling John 3:16**

- How many of you remember when Tim Tebow was playing college football? You know, before minor league baseball and the NFL? He was a star for the Florida Gators. In the 2009 National Championship against Oklahoma, he did something iconic: he came out to play with a special message on his face. On the eye black, he used a white marker to write, “John 3:16.” Every time the camera showed his face, “John 3:16” popped out in bold, white letters for all to see. That day, “John 3:16” became the *most googled* thing on the internet. *90 million people* googled that verse, it was the most-searched topic, because of that simple gesture.
- *But, isn't John 3:16 like the most famous Bible verse—doesn't everyone know it? Why did almost 1/3 of the U.S. population have to google it in 2012? Because in 2012 and in 2021, people don't know John 3:16. People don't know the Bible. For better, for worse, we're living in a decidedly post-Christian culture. The so-called “mission field” isn't overseas, it's outside your door. You can't assume that anyone knows much of anything about the Bible. You can't assume that anyone knows John 3:16 says, “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 need to drop all assumptions, learn to see things anew, as if for the first time, and share it with the world.*
- While I'm guessing most of us know John 3:16, I bet a lot of us have never looked too much at the story that surrounds it. That's what we're looking at today: the context, the strange and wonderful conversation that this most-famous verse comes from. As we do, I think you might see some things you didn't see before and you might even hear John 3:16 as if for the first time.

- **John's Masterpiece**

- First, let's zoom out and look at John a little more to get our bearings in this amazing Gospel. We started looking at the four Gospels last week. And we began this 7-week journey through John by exploring chapter 1, with its incredible prologue about *who Jesus is*—the Word made flesh.
- John is truly a literary *masterpiece*. Have you ever gone to an art museum and seen people just sitting there, staring? Most people look, then keep walking, but there's always that one person sitting on a bench, gazing at the masterpiece. That's kind of how we should read John: sit down for a while and stare at these beautiful accounts of Jesus' life so we can see what John's trying to tell us about him. Every detail, every word has a purpose and it's intricately woven together.
- When you start to look for all the themes he unpacks, it's like a Wikipedia page: every other word is a blue hyperlinks you can click to lead to another place, and another. Every idea is a deep well you can plunge into. In fact, when you read the first chapter, he basically introduces *every idea* that's going to come in the book. So, whenever you read a story in John, you should be asking, *where have I seen this before?* Where was the idea tipped off in the prologue, where does this story connect to the rest of the Gospel, what Old Testament idea is being reframed? Watch for those hyperlinks, they're everywhere.
- Another cool thing John does is give you lots of patterns of *sevens*—because seven is the biblical number that represents “completion.” There are “Seven Signs,” or miracles Jesus does: the water into wine (John 2:1-11), healing the nobleman's son (4:46-54), healing the paralyzed man at the pool (5:1-9), multiplying the loaves and fish (6:1-14), healing the blind man (9:1-12), raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1-44), and finally, Jesus' own resurrection is the 7th sign (20:1-29). Then there are seven “I Am” statements. *“I Am,” where have we seen that before?* Remember the Name God revealed to Moses: *I Am Who I Am*. Get it? Jesus says: *I Am* the Bread of Life (6:35), the Light of the World (8:12), the Gate for the Sheep (10:7), the Good Shepherd (10:11), the Resurrection and the Life (11:25), the Way, the Truth, and the Life (14:6), and the True Vine (15:1). And there are *seven more* “I Am's” known as the “absolute I Am statements,” where Jesus just says in various conversations, *“I Am.”* For example, at the end, when the mob comes to capture him, they ask, “Are you Jesus of Nazareth?” He just replies, *“I am,”* and they all shrink back and fall over each other, because *I Am* is speaking to them!

- All of this is to tell us unequivocally: *there is no one like Jesus; he's the absolutely unique, eternal Son of God come to us; and when Jesus comes into contact with something or someone, he transforms them—water into wine, blind into sight, dead into life.* Isn't this so cool?
- **A Secret Conversation at Night**
 - So, I hope all of that builds your expectation for John 3. Right before today's passage it says, *"...many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person."* Isn't that something? A key word in John is "Believe" or trust, in the Greek it's *pisteuo*: it says people began to *pisteuo* Jesus, but he did not *pisteuo* them—he didn't put his trust in people, because he knows what we are, he sees right through us.
 - If you think that you're generally a good person who has things mostly figured out, and Jesus just came to call "good, nice people" like you and me, John's about to turn things upside down.
 - Enter Nicodemus in John 3: it's a private, secret conversation with Jesus, at night. Nicodemus is one of the good, nice people who have things figured out. He's a teacher of teachers, one of the Jewish Sanhedrin who led the people. Think of your favorite, most prominent preachers today: Charles Stanley, Andy Stanley, Craig Groeschel, Beth Moore, Steven Furtick. That's kind of like what Nicodemus' status was for the Jews. He was supposed to be one of the good guys, he had his New York Times Best Sellers and people looked to his crew. As you know, a lot of those people *didn't like Jesus*, because he pushed the boundaries and threatened their authority.
 - That's why Nico comes at night. (Can we call him Nico for short?) For some reason, he's drawn to Jesus and he wants to know more, but he's afraid of upsetting his status. So, he comes in darkness. We give Nicodemus kind of a bad rap because he's a Pharisee and he remains a bit undecided about Jesus, but there are really interesting hints in his character arc throughout John. He shows up briefly again twice. The last time is really telling: Nicodemus is actually one of the people who comes to help retrieve Jesus' body from the cross and he himself helps to prepare him for burial. So, there are strong hints that Nicodemus was *really close* to becoming a disciple, and maybe he was by the end, but John doesn't give a final answer. He leaves it open: it's almost like he's inviting us to ask ourselves, *how are we going to respond?*
 - I'm sure some of us, if we're honest, are a little scared like Nicodemus was. We're really interested in Jesus, we want to believe in him, but we're scared to be too closely associated with him: we'd rather come when nobody else sees; keep a safe distance from him but stay close enough to watch what he's up to. Many people stay on the edge like that because it's scary to think what openly following Jesus will do to our reputation. *What will people say?* In spite of that, Jesus welcomes the conversation with Nico, and he invites him *to take a closer look.*
 - So, Nicodemus comes at first with words of flattery: *"Teacher, we know you must be from God, because no one can do the things you do apart from God."* Jesus cuts right through it and gets to the heart: *"Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."* Nico is stunned, "What are you talking about? Can someone go back into their mother's womb and be born a second time?" Jesus is persistent, *"Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit...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."*
 - There's a double wordplay here, because the same phrase means "born again" and "born from above," and the same word means "wind" and "spirit." At first, Nicodemus just hears Jesus say "born again" but Jesus is saying "born from above" and either way, it's still weird.
 - Nicodemus is highly learned and influential. He's a rabbi of rabbis, he literally has the Old Testament *memorized*, his whole life has been devoted to it. He comes to Jesus, saying, "I see what you're doing and God must be in it...but I'm not ready to fully trust or commit to you." And Jesus responds, "Nico, you can't really see me or what I'm doing until you're *born from Above.*"
 - *Where have we heard this before?* John 1:11-13 *"He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive 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.*" To all who *receive* Jesus, who *believe*, who *trust*, he gives the right to become *a new kind of person*—children born of the Spirit, born from Above.
- Nicodemus came wanting to learn more, but he didn't yet *believe*. So, he couldn't really see Jesus—he didn't have that inner-transformation that comes from *receiving Christ*. Today we say, "Seeing is believing," but the Bible says *believing is seeing*. Believe, *and then you'll understand*. You have to come to Jesus *trusting* that he is who he is, and in that act of faith, the Spirit will do something in you that makes you *new*. It's why some people can sit here staring at this their whole life, and never really get it—because they haven't been renewed by the Spirit, and they don't really *trust in* Jesus. We're seeing in 2-D, but Jesus is bringing something 3-D.
 - This is where we come to that most famous Scripture of Scriptures. Jesus says to dumbstruck Nicodemus, "You're a teacher of Israel and yet you don't get this? If I'm telling you about earthly things that happen in the lives of humans who trust me, how will you get it when I try to tell you about bigger things, heavenly things?" And Jesus then refers to this odd story from Numbers: the Israelites were being punished for their rebellion by having poisonous snakes come through the camp. Many were dying, but God offered mercy with this strange remedy: Moses was to craft a bronze serpent and lift it up on a pole for all to see. Anyone who looked at it, trusting in God's saving power, was healed. Jesus says, "*Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life.*"
 - It's all very deep and mysterious, but what is John saying? He's saying that we're all in the same situation as Israel: we've all been bitten by this disease of evil, of sin, we've all contributed to it and we've all been victims of it, and on our own, our future is only death. Yet, God has given us a way out that seems strange, but it's about faith: the sacrificial death of Jesus, the Son of God, lifted up on a pole like something cursed, bearing the world's sin. All we need to do, *all we can do*, is look to him. N.T. Wright says, "*...the point of the whole story is that you don't have to be condemned. You don't have to let the snake kill you. God's action in the crucifixion of Jesus has planted a sign in the middle of history. And the sign says: believe, and live.*"
 - "*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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light...*"
 - Frederic Buechner said, "*The Gospel is bad news before it is good news.*" And this is the bad news: *we already stand condemned*. We've already been bit by the snake, we've already got the venom in our veins, we already have the virus and we're spreading it. We need saving.
 - Why do we pretend and pose so much? Why do we try so hard to make others see us a certain way? Why do we carry so much shame? Why do we so often lie and hide? Why are we so anxious about *being exposed*? Why are we so miserable? We can keep fooling others, we can go on fooling ourselves, but we can't fool God. He sees us, all of it. He knows what we are, and in his kindness he says, "believe in me, follow me." We're sick and sinful, we need help, and his name is Jesus. If we receive him and believe in him, he not only heals us, *he makes us into a new kind of person*. It starts with a choice and it unfolds throughout the rest of our lives.
 - God's love for the whole world is so great that he would give his own Son, the Word made flesh, the Life and Light, to hang cursed on a pole, so we could see and believe and be rescued. *Do you believe? Will you believe him today?* That's the question that matters more than any other question. If this is speaking to you, *it's time to pray*.