

God is... What ideas come to mind? God is good! God is love! God is all-knowing, all-present, all-powerful! God is...

God is our refuge and strength; an ever-present help in times of trouble. Ps. 46:1

The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. Ps. 18:2

This AM, I want to begin a series about who God is in light of the personal encounters Jesus had during His earthly ministry. We'll begin our series w/ one of the most notable encounters in the N.T. – Nicodemus in John 3 – where we get a glimpse into the generosity of God. **Read John 3:1-17**

I For God So Generously Loves – He ENGAGES

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not w/ him.” Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

As we begin, it's vital we gain some clarity of the context. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. The Pharisees were a small but influential religious party who were known for their zealous adherence to the Mosaic Law. They were also quite skeptical and adversarial of Jesus.

As a member of the Sanhedrin, Nick was one of the 71 most influential leaders in Israel. The Sanhedrin basically served as the legal system of Israel – which tells us Nicodemus was no fool, but a highly respected leader/teacher in Israel.

I share this b/c too many people think of Nicodemus as a buffoon of sort b/c of the apparent tenor of his dialogue w/ Jesus – but as you'll see, nothing could be further from the truth. I also share b/c Jesus is willing for all to come to Him no matter how important or unimportant they might be.

As the text shares, Nick came to Jesus by night. You could say he was the original *Nick at Night*. He approached Jesus respectfully (calling Him Rabbi) and w/ a desire to exchange ideas w/ the miracle working teacher. Yet he didn't get the meeting he was anticipating. Instead, he was confronted w/ Truth unlike ever before as Jesus told him that to experience God's grace that everyone has to be *born again*.

What Jesus was saying was, “a person who embraces faith in Jehovah through the Messiah comes like a newborn baby.

I need to make two comments here. (1) Jesus makes it clear that genuine salvation requires new birth – *you must be born again* – yet sadly, the idea of being *born again* has fallen on tough times as anyone and everyone appears to claim it. One of the greatest of all biblical terms has been stolen, dragged thru the mud of society and emptied of its meaning.

Did you know – **83%** of Americans call themselves “Christian” including Protestants, Catholics, Mormons and JW’s – w/ **48%** of this group declaring themselves to be **born again**. All kinds of people are claiming this moniker – and yet a lack of Great Commission ministry and the decline of the moral fabric of our country say differently.

My 2nd thought. Sadly, for whatever religious reasons and misconceptions – too many people think they’re headed for heaven b/c they’ve outwardly identified themselves w/ Jesus while inwardly they’ve never experienced true conversion.

MacArthur wrote – *Everybody talkin’ bout heaven ain’t goin’ there.* Sadly this line from an old spiritual accurately describes too many in the church. Outwardly they identify w/ Christ, but inwardly they’ve never been genuinely converted. B/c they cling to a false profession, they fool themselves into thinking they’re on the narrow path that leads to life, when in reality, they’ve found the broad road leads to destruction. To make matters worse, their self-deception is often reinforced by well-meaning, but

undiscerning Christians who naively embrace these people as true believers. Such confusion stems from the watered-down pseudo-gospels being propagated from far too many pulpits. Cheap grace, market-driven ministry, emotionalism, subjectivism, and an indiscriminate inclusivism have all infiltrated the church w/ devastating consequences. As a result, almost any profession of faith is affirmed as genuine – even from those whose lives manifest no signs of true fruit.

Why am I sharing this heavy challenge – b/c unlike the church today – **Jesus NEVER made it easy to follow Him.** Instead of making it easy to believe, Jesus turned away more than he received. Whether it was Nicodemus, Zacchaeus, or the rich young ruler, God refused to soften the truth to gain man's approval. The same holds true for you and me – **God will never dumb-down the Gospel or cheapen grace to make us feel good about our lostness** – He loves us too much not to engage the elephant of sin/lostness in our lives.

II For God So Generously Loves – He EXPLAINS

Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” Jesus answered, “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. 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 w/ everyone born of the Spirit." "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man.

Notice this 1st statement – *Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.*

very truly (*amen, amen*) appears only in John – it solemnly affirms the veracity and significance of what follows – in this case, the necessity of being *born again* for salvation.

You absolutely, positively must be **born again**... there is no other way into a relationship w/ God – **it is non-negotiable!**

Wesley once preached (4) straight sermons on the subject to his congregation. Frustrated, one of the congregants asked why he was speaking on that topic so many times in succession. Wesley responded – b/c you must be born again!

born again (*anóthen*) has (3) meanings which all apply in this case. 1 – to do it a 2nd time; 2 – to begin radically or to have a new beginning; 3 – to be born from above. **In each case, it is a radical work of God not of man's doings.**

For by an act of God's grace are you saved through faith and that not of yourself – it is the free gift of God, not of human effort or involvement so no man can boast. Ep. 2:8-9

If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation, the old is gone and all things have become new. 2 Cor. 5:17

This is a truth we must realize. Salvation isn't the result of religious conjecture or tradition or any effort of man – it's an event that occurs in your life by God's grace. **It is something that happens to you.** No one gains entrance into heaven b/c of their human remorse or religious experience. Neither does church attendance or membership have any bearing on eternity – **the mechanism of salvation is a God authored regeneration of the soul that's received by a faith response when God invites you unto Himself.**

On hearing this declaration, Nick struggled to comprehend what he so intensely desired. He wasn't playing the role of a fool, but desperately trying to grasp the truth Jesus had expressed; **it was just a radical collision w/ the traditions and concepts he had known his entire life.**

Jesus was telling Nick that entrance into God's salvation was not a matter of adding good behavior to his personal resume or intensifying His devotion – Nicodemus was already a very respected, religious man. By human standards, he was one of the most admired men of his day. Jesus told him just the opposite. Jesus said, instead of adding to your list of religious qualifications, you need to cancel everything and start all over. **Only this time, Jesus was making entrance into God's salvation based on something Nicodemus couldn't obtain through human effort.**

By calling Nicodemus to be *born again*, Jesus challenged one of the most influential, Jewish leaders to admit his spiritual bankruptcy and abandon everything he had known and thought to be true – for God's one and only way.

At this point, Jesus offers Nick some clarity.

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.

Let me clarify what Jesus was saying – *born of water* isn't a reference to baptism or physical birth but rather a reference to **repentance**. In the O.T., water was often associated the idea of repentance and spiritual renewal.

For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will 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. I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Ez. 36:24f

Knowing Nicodemus understood this truth and recognizing that John the Baptist was baptizing people in water as a symbol of their **inward repentance**, this was an occasion for Jesus to explain that true salvation requires turning from sin to God's generous grace found at the cross. This requires we accept our condition as sinners incapable of saving ourselves to receive by faith the work of God unto salvation.

W/ repentance, there's a change of action coupled w/ a change of mind and heart. It isn't simply a new direction or an about face – it is a transformation of one's entire life.

Jesus explains to Nick – true salvation is like the wind. You can see the wind's effects even though you can't see the wind. When a person has been born again, the effects of the H.S. will be visible in their lives even though no one can actually see the H.S.

Which brings us to the final truth about God's love...

Nicodemus represents each us. He represents every good, decent, law-abiding citizen who's ever lived. He was a good man who knew about God but he didn't know God. His story reminds us that religion is good, but it's not good enough.

Simple truth – if our relationship w/ God is dependent on being good, then we'll never make it. Our best efforts aren't enough. It's not improbable but impossible for anyone to work their way into heaven. The requisite of new birth teaches us that no one can get to heaven in their own strength. We all need a new start only God can provide.

Grace is God giving to me something I can't obtain on my own. It's being accepted by God even though I neither deserve it nor am worthy of it. Grace can only be received on the basis of my belief and trust in Jesus as my sin payment.

III For God So Generously Loves – He **EXCHANGES**

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 in him.” 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 isn't condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already b/c they have not believed in the name of God's Son.

So what was required of God to accomplish this generosity and grace – God had to enter time and space to offer His life as a satisfactory atoning sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin. He had to exchange His life for yours and mine.

To frame this amazing love for Nicodemus, Jesus framed His sacrifice w/in the context of a very significant O.T. event where God provided grace to the Israelites.

They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!” Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray the Lord will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. The Lord said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived. Num. 21:4-9

Nicodemus would've been very familiar w/ this story, but on this day he received a lesson he'd not soon forget.

We understand the snakes represent sin and the pole lifted up is a foreshadowing of Jesus being lifted up on a cross as the single cure for sin.

God made Him who knew no sin to become sin for us so that we could be made right w/ God. 2 Cr. 5:21

Jesus point was simple. Just as healing from the snakes came as a result of looking in faith to the pole Moses lifted up in the wilderness, so too will salvation be provided to even the most debased of sinners who will turn in faith and trust the cross of Christ for their salvation.

At the cross, b/c of the generous and gracious love of God, God exchanged his life for yours and mine. He was lifted up to be the single cure for the problem of our sin – meaning that if we'd believe in Him by turning our spiritual gaze to him in faith – that he will cure our condition of sin through His forgiveness and grace.

As we move into our invitation time I want to ask you to give. I want you to give your heart to Christ. I want you to give your gifts and abilities to Christ. I want you to give your first love to Christ. I want you to give your money to the work of His kingdom. So today we're going to take an offering for our invitation – and I want you to put some offering into the plate as an expression of your gratitude to God for His generosity towards you.