

John's Gospel - Living in the Light

by John Vissers

Jesus explains to Nicodemus that being born again is a spiritual transformation that occurs through faith in Him, and that it is rooted in His death and resurrection.

Duration: 39:50

Topics: "Gospel Of John"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the love of God and how it is demonstrated through the giving of His Son for the salvation of the world. The passage being discussed is John 3:16-21, which highlights the importance of belief in Jesus for receiving eternal life. The preacher uses an analogy of a visitor in an art gallery to illustrate the need for personal reflection and response to the message of God's love. The sermon concludes with the reminder that everyone is faced with a choice to believe in Jesus and receive salvation or remain condemned in their unbelief.

Transcript

Let us come to God's Word tonight as we continue in our study of John's Gospel. Tonight, I invite you to turn to the third chapter, and we'll pick up the reading in the middle of the chapter at verse 10 through to the end of verse 21. John chapter 3 at verse 10.

Let us hear the Word of God tonight. 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 we 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. 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.

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 he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict.

Light has come into the world, but men 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 his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.

Amen, and may God bless to us this reading from His Word tonight. May He instruct us by His Spirit. Let's pray together, shall we? Lord, we thank You tonight for Your Word, which is a light for us, a guide for us.

We come tonight from the busyness of life, the busyness of this world, the preoccupations of our own lives, and we pray, O God, that You would speak to us through Your Word tonight, that You would apply these words to our hearts and to our minds, these words that are so familiar to us and yet need to ring in a fresh way in our ears, and echo in our hearts, in our lives this night. And so speak to us, we pray. Challenge us through Your Word.

Minister Your grace. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Tonight, in the time that we have, I want to take a third and a final run with you at the opening 21 verses of John chapter 3. We've been in John chapter 3 for a few weeks now, and we started out by looking at the opening three verses where we focused in on Nicodemus. And then we moved on from there, and last week we saw Jesus teaching concerning regeneration, concerning the new life in verses 4 to 8. You remember, as we think into our passage tonight, you'll remember that Nicodemus was a Pharisee, that he was someone who had been well-taught, well-schooled in the Scriptures, that he was also a member of the Jewish ruling council, a man of prestige and power, that he came to Jesus, that he was attracted to Jesus because of the miracles that Jesus had been performing. He saw these as miraculous signs, which, of course, Jesus intended them to be, and he was attracted to Jesus, to his life, and to his ministry.

And so he came to Jesus and sought Him out at night and wanted to have a conversation with Him. No one could do what Jesus did if God were not with him. And so this was Nicodemus as he came to see Jesus.

But the encounter very quickly took a turn which Nicodemus, I suspect, did not expect. Nicodemus' whole world is turned upside down and indeed his own faith and his own understanding is turned inside out because Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again, that he has to start life over, that he has to go back to the beginning and start afresh. And furthermore, Jesus tells him that this is not something that he does himself, but rather it is something done by God, that the Spirit of God comes into one's life and transforms it and makes you a new person, gives you a new existence, a new life, makes you into a new creature, that this is a spiritual reality that you start over.

It is from above. It is an inner transformation. And Nicodemus seems still not fully to understand it.

He seems to be a skeptic of sorts. He doesn't understand or else he simply will not understand. We're not exactly sure from the way the text is written, but it's clear that he doesn't understand and he doesn't yet fully accept or believe what Jesus is saying.

And so in verse 9, as we saw last week, he says in response to the teaching of Jesus on regeneration, how can this be? I don't really understand this or perhaps he's a little more obstinate than that and he's saying I can't understand this, I won't accept this, how can this be? And so he asks for a second explanation. This is the second time now he has turned to Jesus and asked for an explanation. And now

we come tonight to verses 10 to 21.

And in these verses we are now given the explanation, the response to this question of Nicodemus in verse 9. First, Jesus gives an explanation in verses 10 to 15. And then in verses 16 and 17, we have the wonderful promise of the Gospel outlined, the very familiar words of John 3.16 and the verses that follow. And then toward the end of this paragraph in verses 19 to 21, we are given a verdict.

This is the verdict, a decision now has been rendered. What will our response be to this decision which has been made? Now the commentators are split actually as to whether all of this consists of the words of Jesus. Some of them say that it's really only verses 10 to 15 which constitutes Jesus' response and then verses 16 to 21 constitute the commentary by John the Gospel writer which is added to interpret the words of Jesus.

Others believe that Jesus in fact spoke all of these words and that all of this ought to be taken as the response of Jesus to Nicodemus' question. Whatever the case, it really doesn't matter because the themes that are outlined here are what are of fundamental importance. And in fact, this whole section is chock full of themes that are central in John's Gospel.

And I want us to just notice what some of these themes are before we look at the explanation and the response of Jesus a little more directly. The first theme that's identified here is the theme of belief or faith which is mentioned four times in this section. Notice that in verse 12, I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe.

How then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? In verse 15, 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. Verse 16, 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. And then verse 18, whoever believes in Him is not condemned but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

Now this ought to be a clue to us that whatever Jesus means by regeneration, by being born again as we saw this unfolded for us last week, now we come to see that it has to do with faith. That belief is central to this, that it's related to faith and we need to pay attention to this. And of course faith is a theme which recurs again and again throughout the Gospel of John.

A second theme which emerges again and again in this section is the theme of life. More specifically, eternal life. The phrase appears in verse 15, for example, in relation to faith and again in verse 16.

And so the theme of life is a very important one, receiving eternal life. And so again, whatever we are to understand by what Jesus teaches concerning regeneration, being born again, it is related to eternal life. We're not just talking about a renewed life for the here and the now, but we are talking about a life which is given forever, eternal life.

A third theme that I want you to notice just by way of introduction is the theme of the Son, S-O-N. In verses 13 and 14, Jesus refers to Himself using His favorite description, the Son of Man. Now, this is a messianic title, a title for the Messiah in the Old Testament, and it's one of Jesus' favorite titles for Himself.

He uses it again and again and again throughout the Gospels. Jesus already used it in John 1, in verse 51, earlier in the Gospel. And in His commentary and in the interpretation in verses 16, 17, and 18, we find

again Jesus is referred to as the one and only Son, the only begotten Son.

The same language that is used again earlier in John 1, in verses 18 and 34. And so the idea which emerges throughout here and is reiterated again and again, especially here in chapter 3, is that the Son of Man, this messianic title applied to Jesus, which Jesus takes to Himself, the Son of Man is the Son of God. The one and only Son begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

And again, the clue for us here is that whatever Jesus means by regeneration, whatever He means by being born again, it is centered somehow, it is related somehow to His own life, to His own ministry, and as we shall see, to His own death and resurrection. Notice as well that the theme of light emerges here. In fact, the whole last part of this passage is about light, verses 19 to 21.

John 3 opens, as we've seen, with Nicodemus seeking Jesus out at night. And I suggested to you that this was more than the reality of Him coming at night. There may have been all kinds of practical reasons as to why He came and sought Jesus out at night, but there's a symbolic thing going on here.

He's coming to Him out of His own darkness, out of His own spiritual searching, out of His own spiritual struggle. And it's interesting, that's how John 3 opens, and this encounter concludes then with the words about the light and the darkness. And so this passage concludes with an announcement that the light has come into the world in Jesus, but many people continue to choose the darkness.

And then finally, the themes of love and truth, which are dominant in John's Gospel, also appear here in verses 16, and then truth in verses 11 and 21. And I've taken a bit of time here just to unfold and to uncover, as it were, these themes because there's a richness here. There's a richness which certainly connects what is going on here with the rest of John's Gospel.

And these are themes which are central to the Gospel, and I think if we understand them, and as they are woven together throughout this passage, they give us a richer and a deeper understanding of what we saw last week, that is the reality of regeneration, and now the explanation that Jesus gives in this passage tonight in response to Nicodemus' question. Well, let's come then to verses 10 to 15 and to the explanation which Jesus gives in response to the question posed by Nicodemus. You'll remember that Jesus has been talking about the new birth, but somehow Nicodemus still doesn't understand.

And verse 10 seems to contain a note of sadness, as it were, in the response that Jesus makes to Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a teacher of Israel. He's a leader.

But there's a note of sadness here as Jesus seems to understand that Nicodemus doesn't get it, that Nicodemus doesn't understand. But there's more than sadness here. There's also, as it were, a kind of chastisement.

It's not simply that he doesn't understand, but it's almost the force of the words of Jesus indicate that he will not understand, that somehow he can't or that he won't understand. And the implication of what Jesus says here is that Nicodemus, of all people in Israel, of anyone in Israel, Nicodemus should have known. He was, after all, well taught.

He was well schooled in the law of God. He had spent many hours in studying the Torah. He had been well schooled.

He was a person of power and prestige. He knew the prophets. He should have known what Jesus was talking about when Jesus told him to be born again.

The prophets, after all, foretold it, as we saw last week in the reference to Ezekiel. John the Baptist, after all, had been announcing it and Nicodemus would have seen that and seen the ministry of John the Baptist and the disciples of Jesus had been experiencing a transformation in their own lives. And so Nicodemus should have been a person who had seen all this, who should have understood all this, but Jesus, with a note of sadness, but also with a note of chastisement, says to Nicodemus, you of all people should understand this, but for some reason, you don't.

And Jesus had tried to explain this spiritual reality using an earthly analogy, but even then, Nicodemus somehow doesn't understand it. And Jesus says, if you can't even understand earthly things, how in the world are you ever going to understand the spiritual realities about which I am teaching? James Boyce in his commentary on John's Gospel has a wonderful paraphrase of these verses. He puts it this way.

Jesus says, Do you mean to tell me that you have risen to the point of being a teacher in Israel, and yet you have never observed the transformed life of a person who has been touched by My Spirit? I am telling you the truth when I say that all of us are speaking about things which we know personally. And we are testifying to things which we have often observed in others. You don't believe us.

If I have testified to transformation in others that can be observed and you do not believe, how could you believe if I were to tell you about things that can only be known by revelation? If you can't look out, if you can't look upon My ministry, Nicodemus, if you can't read the prophets, if you can't see the ministry of John the Baptist and see that what I am saying is true, that it's a reality, then what more could I possibly say or do? If you don't understand this, using even an earthly analogy and illustration to try to explain it to you, then how can I possibly explain it to you using heavenly or spiritual realities? Nicodemus should have known. He should have understood. He should have gotten it.

And we're not told at all whether he ever did fully understand, at least not in this passage. He appears later again in the Gospel of John and seems to have a continuing relationship with Jesus, but at this point, he doesn't seem to get it. And then notice that Jesus goes even further because He says, I can speak this way because I have come down from heaven.

He says to Nicodemus, I am more than a teacher who has come from God, which was the way that Nicodemus had described Jesus in v. 2, but rather Jesus is saying I can teach this way because I have access to heavenly realities. How? Why? Because, Jesus says, I Myself have come from heaven. I am the Son of Man, the Messiah, who has descended from heaven.

I have come from heaven with a heavenly teaching. I have descended from heaven to bring the reality of this message to you. You must be born again.

And you can be born again. And this is then followed by a reference to the Old Testament, to an Old Testament story, the story of the snake in the desert, which we find in Numbers 21, v. 4-9. I'm not going to take the time tonight to read that passage, but it's a very interesting story.

The people of Israel are out in the desert. They're wandering. They're trying to make their way to the promised land, and as often happened, they began to grumble and they began to complain.

They became impatient with God. They became impatient and irritated with Moses. They thought that Moses had brought them out of Egypt only to wander around in this desert for year after year after year, living from hand to mouth, not, in fact, finding the promised land which had been held out for them.

And so they began to grumble and they began to complain. But this time, instead of God meeting their needs immediately, God, in fact, brought judgment upon them. And as the story goes, in response to their complaints, God sent snakes, venomous snakes, as it were, among the people, and they bit the people, the text says, so that many of them got sick and died.

And they cried out for mercy to God, and God responded. God told Moses to make a bronze snake and to put it on a pole and to raise it in the midst of the people, and those who looked to this pole, all those who were bitten could look upon it and be healed and receive salvation. And so it became the means of salvation, this raising of this pole with the bronze snake in the midst of the people.

As it was lifted up, as the people looked at it, it became the means of their salvation. It became the means of their healing. It became the means of their rescue, as it were, from this difficult, terrible situation in which they found themselves because they had been grumbling and complaining.

And what Jesus is saying about Himself when He alludes to this story is very clear. The story would have been well known to Nicodemus, and Jesus gives His own explanation. There is no mystery here.

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man, Jesus, must be lifted up on a cross for salvation. He came from heaven. The Son of Man descended, brought heavenly realities, brought heavenly teaching, brought spiritual teaching.

You must be born again. But He's also going to be exalted again. And the beginning of that exaltation is the cross.

He's going to be raised up. And those who look to the cross, and those who cast themselves upon the cross, will find salvation and will find healing in Him. It will be a place of life.

It will be a place of eternal life. Now what does all this have to do with being born again? What does all this have to do with regeneration? Well, everything. Because one might get the impression, in terms of what Jesus has already said and from what we looked at last week, that the new birth is something that just happens.

That regeneration is something that just happens. It kind of happens out of the blue. God makes new people through His Word and Spirit and God does it.

And all of that is true, but it's not arbitrary. The means through which new life comes to us, the means through which new life and salvation is brought into the world is through the cross of Jesus Christ. It is possible because of what Christ has done.

It is possible because He descended from Heaven with a spiritual teaching. But it is even more possible because He was lifted up in the midst of the people on a cross, the cross of Calvary, where He paid the price for our sins so that we might be justified before God. And you see, what happens when a person is born again, what happens when the Spirit of God is at work in the life of a person, is that that person casts themselves upon the cross of Christ.

They trust in Christ. And what Christ has done for them. They place their full weight down upon Jesus.

They stand beneath the cross. They look at the cross of Jesus and see it not as a defeat, but they see it as the exaltation of the living Lord who died for them in their place for their sin. You see, Jesus is more than a teacher who came from God.

He is that. But He is the Son of Man who is the Son of God who was raised up on a cross for our salvation. And new life.

The reality of regeneration, Jesus is saying, is rooted in, is centered in my death and my resurrection, my exaltation. And then we come to v. 16-18 where we have the wonderful words, the familiar words, these inspiring words, John 3-16, for God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life. Without a doubt, this is the most familiar, the most well-known of all of Bible texts.

It's not only a favorite, but certainly the most well-known and a Bible text that almost everyone can cite. But notice the context in which we find it here. Why does Jesus die on the cross? Why does this take place? Why is it that the reality of this new life comes through the death of Jesus upon a cross? What a strange thing that we should find new life, that new life should be given to us by the Spirit of God through what Christ has done on the cross.

What is the reason for this? The reason is that God so loved the world. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. There's a promise being given.

There's a reality being described here. It is the reality of the love of God and the promises that if you respond by faith, then you too can share in this life about which Jesus is speaking. And everything begins and is rooted in the love of God.

You see, the lifting up of the Son, the raising of the cross, is not an afterthought. It's not plan B because plan A didn't work out. It is an expression of the eternal plan, the eternal love of God for His creation.

It is an eternal act of love and it is done according to God's plan. And in the Bible, and I've said this before, and it cannot be stressed enough, in the Bible, the love of God is not, it never is a mushy feeling or some kind of nice disposition that God has towards us, but the love of God is active, self-giving, self-sacrificing love for His people, for His creation. The love of God is defined by the cross of Jesus Christ.

If you want to understand what the love of God is all about in the Bible, it's not some emotionally vague feeling that God has, but it is expressed and uncovered and unveiled on the cross of Jesus. That's why the writer John can say in his letter in 1 John 4, this is love. Not that we loved God, but that God loved us and gave His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sin.

For God so loved the world. For God commended His love toward us, Paul says, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. I love to think of this text as a great four-act play uncovering, as it were, four great themes of the Gospel.

The love of God, act 1. The love of the Father. Act 2, the giving of the Son. Act 3, the response of faith.

Those who believe. Those who trust. And then act 4 as the curtain opens, eternal life, sharing in the life that Jesus has been speaking about.

The great hymn song put it so well, the love of God is greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell. It goes beyond the highest star and reaches to the lowest hell. The guilty pair bowed down with care.

God gave His Son to win. His erring child He reconciled and rescued from His sin. O love of God, how rich and pure, how measureless and strong, it shall forevermore endure the saints' and angels' song.

No one can look at this text. No one can read this text and not somehow, as you begin to understand it, be moved by the reality about which it describes, the reality about which it speaks, the love of God and the giving of His Son. How is new life possible because God so loved that He gave His Son? And then very quickly notice then that we come to the verdict in verses 19-21, the final few lines of this passage.

God so loved the world, the text says, that He gave His only Son for our salvation. Everyone who believes is saved. God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world.

Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. Now some people look at this text and they consider it to be a very harsh teaching because the words with which Nicodemus is left, as it were, are words of judgment. A verdict.

Condemnation for unbelief. But I want you to notice what is being said here because I don't think this is always clearly understood. And stay with me here because I think there's an insight here.

I think what is being uncovered for us here is very important. Many people would look at these verses and say if you don't believe in Jesus, if you don't believe, if you don't have faith, you will be lost. As if it's something yet to happen.

But that's not what this text is saying. What this text is saying is if you don't believe in Jesus, my friend, you are already lost. You see, what is being said here is that God sent His Son into the world not to condemn the world because the world was already condemned, but to save it.

God sent His Son not to condemn us, the text says, but to save us. The reality is that we already stand under condemnation because of our sin and our rebellion against God. Both the sin in which we are born and the sin which we ourselves share in and actively participate in day by day.

We stand condemned by our own lives. But here now is the paradox. The coming of the Son, the coming of the light, Jesus is the light of the world, sharpens the issue because the coming of the light, the coming of the Son has exposed our sin.

And the coming of Jesus has uncovered our condemnation because now the verdict has been made clear. The verdict has been rendered. This is the verdict.

Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. You see, the verdict has been rendered. We stand condemned.

The light has come into the world to save us, but the flip side of that is that it also exposes us. The light is sent into the world so that we might see the light, that we might respond by faith, that we might trust in Christ, that we might place our full weight down upon Him, that we might experience the transforming

reality of the Spirit of God at work in our lives, that we might become new people. That's the purpose of the sending of the Son.

But the reality is that the light also exposes us and we can't hide any longer. And now, and this is the profound and powerful word that's left before Nicodemus and the word that's left before all of us, now a choice has to be made because we can't hide any longer because the light has come into the world and the light has come into the world to save us, but now as that light has come, it's exposed us and now a choice has to be made. Are we going to live in the light or run away from the light? Are we going to trust in Christ or reject Christ? Are we going to go on the side of truth as it says in the latter verses or will we continue to live in the darkness of lies? You see, that's the way in which this passage draws all of these themes together.

And it leaves us all before the verdict with a choice to be made. Last summer, this past summer, my wife and I had the wonderful privilege, the wonderful experience of visiting the Netherlands and one of the highlights of that visit for me was to visit the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. This is something that I've wanted to do for all of my life.

I grew up in a family, a Dutch family, which honored the Dutch masters. My grandfather loved art, loved painting, and so I grew up with all these paintings, Rembrandt and Vermeer and Van Gogh and all the others. So to be able to actually stand for the first time in my life in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and to stand before the Nightwatch painting was an experience that I can't even describe in words.

I would have spent all day just standing there. My wife finally had to drag me away and take me off for lunch. I would have just stood there.

I was just awestruck. And to see Rembrandt's Lamentation of Jeremiah, Jeremiah's lament over Jerusalem, it's a print actually that we bought and brought back together with some other ones. A very moving experience, and it was just a wonderful, wonderful and moving experience for me.

But as I stood there on one of the days, I was reminded of a story about a visitor who was being shown around an art gallery by a guide, and the gallery was filled with masterpieces and priceless possessions of eternal beauty and unquestioned genius. And at the end of the tour, the visitor wasn't really very impressed, and so he said to the guide, I really don't think very much of your old, musty, dusty pictures. And the guide answered quietly, but very firmly, Sir, I would remind you that these pictures are no longer on trial, but those who look at them are.

And you see, what had happened is that his reaction, his response, his comment had done nothing more than expose his own ignorance and his own pitiable darkness. And that's what this text is saying, my friends. This is the verdict.

Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. That's how it is with Jesus Christ. Jesus is no longer on trial.

Jesus doesn't have to prove anything to anybody. Nicodemus, in this text, is now on trial. And as we read and hear this text tonight, we are on trial.

The verdict has been rendered. And I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see. You cannot see the kingdom of God.

And whoever lives by the truth comes into the light so that they may see what may be seen plainly, that what he has done has been done through God. Where are you tonight? Are you in the light, in the darkness, somewhere in the shadows? The verdict has been rendered. What is your response? Let's pray together.

Lord, we thank You tonight for this teaching, Your Word. And we confess that as we stand before Your Word, that too often like Nicodemus, we don't understand or we won't understand, break through our wills, break through our minds, break into our souls by Your Spirit tonight. And enable us, we pray, by Your grace to experience the life which comes through Your death and resurrection.

In Your name we pray. Amen.

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