

John 3:7-18

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[0 : 00] Great, well, if you've not been around the last few weeks, it's good to see you here today. We're carrying on in a series looking at belief, the idea of belief, what that is, what it isn't, in John's Gospel.

And I want to direct you to one particular verse in this passage today, which I think sums up what we see in this section in the Gospel. And just drop your eye down to verse 13 there. Jesus still speaking to Nicodemus. Verse 13, he says, No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

It's not an easy verse to understand even in the English, is it? But in the original language, it's hard to understand the grammar. But I want to try and cut to the chase to try and simplify it for you this afternoon.

Jesus is saying here, I think, that true belief in him, becoming a genuine follower of Jesus, is about having upside down belief.

[1 : 13] It is having upside down thinking. It is recognising that to go up, there must be a coming down.

That Jesus himself goes up by coming down. He ascends to the glory of heaven by descending. And that's the pattern for everyone here. He says, doesn't he, no one has ascended to the glory of God's kingdom unless there is first a descent, a coming down.

And true belief in the context of what we saw last week is grasping that and understanding that and embracing that. You remember the way that the conversation with Nicodemus starts back in chapter 2.

You can flick back there later if you want to. Nicodemus comes to Jesus and he says, we know, doesn't he, we know that you, Jesus, are a teacher come from God.

[2 : 21] And we thought last week, didn't we, about how that shows Nicodemus' pride really. As if to say, we've got you pinned down, Jesus.

We know who you are. And we've got the intellect. We've got the wherewithal to work you out. It came from a place of arrogance, of human pride in reaching the highest heights of heaven in religion and in reasoning and in human deduction.

In thinking that we can ascend by ourselves, we know who you are, Jesus. But Jesus demolishes that view, doesn't he? He says, to have any interest in heaven, in the kingdom of God, you've got to be born from above, Nicodemus.

You on earth, in your fleshy creatureliness, in your natural resistance to God, are stuck, I'm afraid, Jesus says, with your feet firmly in the dust.

What you have naturally is totally inadequate to know who I am and to even see the kingdom of God, let alone ascend to it.

[3 : 38] Human beings cannot ascend in their own natural strength. And so already we start to see this idea, don't we? To go up, something needs to come down.

Something needs to descend. From heaven to us. And affect our identity and our very existence. What you need, Jesus says, is a birth from above.

A mysterious spiritual transformation by the Holy Spirit. But if all of that sounds strange, we ask, don't we, how does that actually work?

It sounds quite abstract. And that is what Nicodemus asks in verse 9, isn't it? How can these things be, Jesus? And Jesus gives some answers, and I want to run through them quickly and give some conclusions at the end.

The new birth that comes from above. The new birth that comes from above and affects a person as they truly believe. Comes down for a person when the message of God descends.

[4 : 49] When the message of God descends. And just look at verse 11. Truly, truly, truly, we speak of what we know.

And Jesus says. Truly, truly, it's literally, amen, amen. And whenever Jesus says that, it kind of brings emphasis, doesn't it?

We kind of listen to what he's saying. Truly, truly. But as well as that, it's a mark in speech. It marks a change in the tone of the conversation.

It marks a different level of discourse. Jesus says, I am going to speak to you, Nicodemus, now. On a completely different level from what you're used to.

I'm going to speak of heavenly things. Speak of things on a different order. In a language that you're not used to hearing. In categories that you're not used to listening to.

[5 : 52] If you watch The Lord of the Rings, it's like the scene when the Fellowship of the Ring, just kind of before the first movie gets going. They're all gathered around the ring, trying to work out who is going to take it to Mount Doom, aren't they?

And they're all arguing amongst themselves. They're all babbling. And Gandalf, he's really fed up with it. And he takes this deep breath and opens his arms up. And he bellows in the language of Mordor.

And they all cower, don't they? They've never heard it before. And Jesus roars here, truly, truly, amen, amen. Not in the language of Mordor, but as the final witness from heaven.

To teach us things of heaven. To teach us the categories of things that we've never understood before. And it's a clever retort, isn't it, to what Nicodemus says way back in chapter 2.

Do you remember how he starts? We know Jesus. Truly, truly, truly, we speak of what we know, Jesus says.

[7 : 01] Jesus, by comparison of your earthly knowledge, Nicodemus, is going to give you an insight into heavenly things.

Way above and beyond your philosophical, religious, and rational thoughts. I'm going to take you outside of your echo chamber, Nicodemus.

And give you a message from heaven itself, descending to you. He speaks of a superior message that he has, that he's shared with his disciples.

That's the we there. A revelation that comes in him. The descended one from heaven. The person that came into the world from being with the Father.

He descended. And so, notice the conversation from verse 11. It changes, actually, from being a conversation at all. And it changes to a monologue.

[8 : 06] See that? Nicodemus doesn't say anything, obviously, at this point. Because what we need to realise is that in order to go up, to ascend to the kingdom of heaven, he must come down, and he must speak from heaven to us.

Not just as a messenger, but as the message itself, himself. And for the new birth to happen in your life, you need this voice coming down from heaven in the person of Jesus.

No other voices matter. The message descends. Secondly, in this new birth, what else happens? The message descends.

Secondly, the life of God descends to us. Look at verse 14. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. That's a funny illustration, isn't it? What's he talking about? Serpents in the wilderness. He draws on something that happened in the life of God's people back in Numbers.

[9 : 24] Numbers chapter 21. And in that story, God's people were dying. They turned from God. And as a punishment, they were being bitten by snakes.

And God, as a way of rescuing them, tells Moses, lift up a bronze serpent on a pole and get the people to look at the serpent.

And they will be healed if they will be healed if they will be healed if they will be healed if they do that. God was saying, wasn't he? I am able and willing to give them life and to heal them.

And it was about faith in God's promise to do that. To simply look at this bronze serpent and be rescued and to be given life. The bronze serpent lifted up.

And Jesus uses that illustration to speak of the life that is in him. The descended one. The son of man lifted up.

[10 : 25] For all to look to. But it is strange, isn't it? How Jesus speaks of this lifting up. To look at him.

To trust in him. To live. What he means by him being lifted up here is strange. To be lifted up implies being kind of put on display, doesn't it?
To being put on public view like the bronze serpent was. It means being put on display. Part of a means of receiving recognition and honour and even glory.
But as you go through the Gospels. And as you see the way that Jesus describes this lifting up. It has a double meaning. The lifting up also refers to Jesus' being lifted up on the cross. In his death. And so it's really intriguing, isn't it? That Jesus and the way that John presents his own death. The moment of his worst failure in ministry is the moment of his greatest glory.
[11 : 35] It sounds contradictory, doesn't it? His cross. His death. Is not presented here as his humiliation. But as his lifting up.

As his glorification. As a presentation. As a display of God's gift of life. Looking at a mutilated body. Dying on a cross. That is the last thing that goes through our mind, isn't it? As we look at him there. It's the same for God's people in the wilderness.
As they were suffering from snake bites. The last thing they wanted to see was a snake on a pole. But that is why belief in Jesus is kind of upside down, isn't it?
That the ascent is in the descent. Where at his lowest he is gaining the highest victory.
[12 : 35] It explains the words, so must the son of man be lifted up in verse 14. In other words, it has to be like this.

That life and ascent into God's kingdom for anybody. Comes through the means of his descent. A descent even to the point of utter shame and weakness and death.
If you go back to last week, if you remember those people. The many who believed in the signs that Jesus showed. It kind of helps us understand why that belief wasn't genuine in the end.
Because that belief was based exclusively on these outward signs of great power. That Jesus showed. But true belief, real Christian belief, is belief in the one who descends.
The one who descends to the dust on which we are ensnared. It is a belief, isn't it, that recognises with John here. That power in Jesus is most seen in his powerlessness.
[13 : 51] Whose lifting up, whose glory is in his going down. Life is found in his descent to death. The life of God that descends.

So the message of God, the life of God. Thirdly, the love of God that descends. John 3, 16.
Probably the most famous Bible verse, isn't it? And everyone knows it. I want to show you, if I can, that the overwhelming emphasis from John in that verse.
And in this section is the love of God. The important word in John 3, 16. I don't know if you've ever noticed it. It's the little two-letter word.
So. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son. Now, if you delete that word, it kind of still makes sense, doesn't it?
[14 : 54] For God loved the world that he gave his one and only son. So by adding that little word so in there, what is John trying to show us here? He's trying to give us a measurement of God's love, isn't he?

God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only son. He wants to show us the quantity, the quality, the measurement of God's love, doesn't he, here?
And he does that by showing a switch in the name given to Jesus. Just look at verse 15. How is Jesus described? He is the son of man, isn't he?
It's a title from the Old Testament, from the book of Daniel. It speaks of the great God, man, the king, the Messiah. But that name, it changes in John 3, 16 to the only son, isn't it?
To God's only son. It draws out a measurement of the love of God the Father as he sends, as he gives, not just a great king or a Messiah to rescue us, but his only son to descend into the world to give life in his death.
[16 : 18] In the eternal counsels of God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. This sending, this giving was a mutual decision.

It's not that God the Father kind of throws the son to the wolves against his will. But this giving, it is a handing over.
It is a surrendering. It is a gifting of God's most precious possession, his only son, in whom he's well pleased.
You know, I'd really have to think about it. I'd really struggle to think of any single person in this world that I'd be willing to exchange the life of my son for.

Let alone the whole world. He says, doesn't he, in verse 17, God sent his son not to condemn the world. It's true that Jesus did bring judgment, but he wants to emphasize this intention in God, his love.

[17 : 25] This side of the mission. The only judgment is that people refuse to acknowledge this love. So God's love descends in the person of Christ.

Now I want to try and draw these three things together if we can. This idea of ascending and descending is all throughout the Bible actually.

This language of kind of going up and coming down helps us to understand that the gulf that is between us and God. Ascending the mountain of the Lord.

We get that a lot, don't we? To be in his presence. It illustrates the transcendence of God. And who can climb that distance?

Who can ascend into the kingdom of God? There's a guy called John Cracker. He's an experienced mountaineer. And he was part of an ill-fated expedition up Everest in 1996 where 12 people died.

[18 : 32] I'm trying to get to the summit of Everest. He's managed it many times. And he's written about what he's noticed of the kind of people who think they can ascend the mighty mountain of Everest by themselves.

He says Everest has always been a magnet for kooks, publicity seekers, hopeless romantics and others with a shaky hold on reality.

And if that is true of Mount Everest, how much more true is it of the mountain of God to ascend into heaven?

If we think that we can do that, we've got an even more shaky hold on reality, haven't we? We cannot go up.

We cannot ascend there. But there is one, isn't there, who comes down. Who is the descended message from God.

[19 : 34] His life, his love, all coming down to us. And this is how the new birth happens. As people receive him, his message, his life, his love in the person of Jesus.

True belief involves this new birth. And we could think it's kind of abstract, couldn't we? It's this transcendent spiritual phenomenon or experience.

But the new birth is not anonymous. It's not a faceless thing. It's not that we need something to come down from heaven, from above, to transform us and bring us up.

It's that we need someone. This new birth, it's kind of got a face. It's about a person. It happens in Jesus Christ.

The new birth has got flesh on it, in a way. So, if you're left thinking that this new birth stuff is just beyond me, I don't get it. As we saw last week, we can't do genuine belief, can we?

[20 : 50] It's far above us. But Jesus Christ, he puts flesh on the whole experience. And when we can't go up, we must go to this person who has come down.

To trust him as the embodiment of the message and of the life and the love of God, descending down from the top of the mountain to bring us up.

Let's pray together.