

# John 3:1-16

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Preacher: Paul Levy

[ 0 : 00 ] And turn if you've got a church Bible to John chapter 3. John chapter 3. We're working our way through John's Gospel on Sunday mornings.

! You must be born again.

If you've been in church for any length of time, you will have heard that. Some of you who've been brought up in church will have known it since you were children. And I've spoken on John 3 a number of times over the years.

I've often focused on the character of Nicodemus. But I'm not sure I've ever preached it with such a clear understanding of the context before. It's really important, isn't it, that we don't take verses out of context.

It can mean something very different. It's one of the reasons why in this church we try to take the Bible, books of the Bible, and go through them to let the Bible set the agenda.

[ 1 : 11 ] So that we can understand each part of the Bible in the flow that it's been given. We often come to the Gospels, don't we, like pick and mix? Like the tombola at the school faith that you put your hand in and you pull out a Gospel story.

And it stands on its own. And there's a sense in which you can do that. But each of the stories in the Bible are carefully embedded with a story before them and with a story after them.

Let me just show you that. Flick back with me to John chapter 1. Can you see how John's Gospel started? In the beginning was the Word.

And immediately, if you know your Bible, there are bells ringing, aren't they? Because that is how the Bible began. That is how the Old Testament started. In the beginning, God made the heavens and the earth.

And right from the beginning of his Gospel, John is wanting you and I to know how this relates to the Old Testament. Right from the beginning, he's wanting you and I not to think, oh, this is something brand new.

[ 2 : 22 ] This relates to Judaism. In the beginning. And then flick forward to chapter 1 and verse 17. It says there, there's a hint there, isn't there?

For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. Here is a new beginning, isn't there? There is something new that is starting.

We are going further than the law could take us. And then on the next page, in verses 35 to 37, you have John the Baptist, the greatest, we're told, of all the Old Testament prophets.

He's the greatest of all the Old Testament prophets. He's a great teacher. The greatest prophet that the world has seen so far. And disciples have begun to follow him.

But in verses 35 to 37, can you see what happens? John is standing with two of his disciples. He looked at Jesus as he walked by. And he points to Jesus and he says, behold, the Lamb of God.

[ 3 : 28 ] The two disciples, John's disciples, hear him say this. And what did they do? They follow Jesus. When he sees Jesus passing by, he points to him and says, behold, the Lamb of God and his disciples follow Jesus.

Now that's telling you something very significant. That the followers of the greatest prophet of the Old Testament leave the Old Testament prophet and they follow this person called Jesus.

They realise they can't stay with John the Baptist any longer. There is a new light. The light of the world. Who fulfils all the hopes of the Old Testament.

And so they begin to follow him. Do you remember chapter 2? That's what we've looked at the last couple of Sundays. The famous story of turning the water into wine. It's that famous wedding sermon, isn't it?

Of Jesus going to the wedding. It's so simple, so powerful. That Jesus comes to ordinary, unnamed people. And he brings joy to them in the ordinary things of life.

[ 4 : 38 ] He brings joy and he brings life. He brings fullness. He literally turns the Old Testament washing rituals into life, into wine.

Life giving fullness. And then last week we saw the cleansing of the temple. And Jesus comes to judge his people. Those two things.

He brings joy at the start of chapter 2 to ordinary people. And at the end of chapter 2 he brings judgment to the people of God. He brings wonderful life and fullness.

And yet he comes to clean out the impurity of his church. He comes to those old corrupt structures and he brings judgment.

Now if you go to many churches this morning, you will hear lots about the start of chapter 2. You will hear lots about life and joy and fullness. And Jesus can bring great fulfillment.

[ 5 : 40 ] You will not hear so much about the second half of chapter 2 though, will you? That Jesus has come to judge his church. And Jesus will not put up with it. But John's Gospel wants you to see you can't have one without the other.

They are both vital. And so we thank God, don't we? We praise God this morning that he brings joy into everyone's life who believes in him.

We cannot say that too emphatically. But we can say that too exclusively. The fact is that Jesus does bring joy to men and women and boys and girls. But he will also bring judgment to his people. And he will clear out his church that is going away from his truth. And that's the position we've come to at the end of chapter 2. And so when we come into chapter 3 and there's this little evening conversation behind closed doors.

With a man walking into the darkness to a flat and the wind we imagine howling down the alley. And Jesus talking as a much younger man to an older man.

[ 6 : 48 ] To a leader of the Jewish nation. To a man called Nicodemus. A member of the Jewish ruling council. Two things about Nicodemus.

Nicodemus represents to us the best of Judaism. Nicodemus represents to us firstly the best of Judaism.

The best of the nation of Israel and their faith. I think Nicodemus is Israel at its best. He's often criticised. I think I've criticised him in the past. For coming at night under the cover of darkness. I don't think that's really valid. He may have been working in the day. We don't know. I'm sure he came cautiously. Maybe he's a little bit nervous about coming to see him.

We don't know. He did slip along in the night. He did want this conversation to be in confidence. It's a very natural thing to do isn't it? Most of the Jewish ruling council of Hebrews apart.

[ 7 : 50 ] Had decided by their attitudes and their words. They declared against Jesus. Or they were beginning to do so. And so Nicodemus comes cautiously to find out what's being said.

But he also comes doesn't he? Very honestly and very candidly. Very openly. Sincerely. Look at verse 2. This man came to Jesus by night. And said to him.

Rabbi. We know that you are a teacher from God. For no one can do these signs. That you do. Unless God is with him. Nicodemus says to Jesus. We recognise it. We have to say it. You might not get the impression from the ruling council.

And their attitudes towards you. But we do know it. And we confess that it is the truth. He calls him doesn't he? Rabbi.

[ 8 : 52 ] Rabbi is a little bit. Well it's an official title. It's a bit like professor. Or doctor. The title Rabbi speaks of somebody who's been through training.

Who is an accredited teacher. No one would give that title to a carpenter from Nazareth. And certainly to a carpenter who's never been to seminary.

It shows doesn't it. Nicodemus has been candid and honest. He gives Jesus a title. A courtesy title of a teacher. He calls this young man who is turning everything upside down.

He says you are a teacher. You're a teacher who's come from God. I recognise it. Because no one else can do the things that you're doing. Unless they were sent from God. Nicodemus as he sits there.

Trying to find out what Jesus is doing. And what Jesus is saying. Is full of two things isn't he? Which in and of themselves are not bad. In fact they're very valuable.

[ 9 : 57 ] He's full of the pride of knowledge. He's got 2000 years of Jewish history. He's got the knowledge that God has sent through the prophets.

The knowledge of the law of God through Moses. And that knowledge from the Old Testament is still indispensable. And true knowledge. And Nicodemus stands as kind of a repository of that. At college he was trained in it. At synagogue he taught it. He is a representative of the knowledge of the Old Testament. He is Judaism at its best. He gives to Jesus the language.

The title of Rabbi. He says you are Israel's teacher. But secondly he stands before us. With the best of pedigrees.

The best of Judaism. The best of pedigrees. He's a man born and bred into Judaism. There's long generations of people before him.

[ 11 : 04 ] God's people. God's covenant people. Who'd kept the law. Who'd valued the prophets. And so Nicodemus could not help but be proud of his inheritance.

Of Judaism. But to this man. Who is proud of his inheritance. And proud of his pedigree. Comes a bolt into the blue.

Look at verse 3. Jesus says nothing about verse 2 does he? Verse 3 doesn't lead on from verse 2. There's no kind of evolution from verse 2 to verse 3. Jesus doesn't say thank you for the compliments. It is very stark isn't it? Verse 3. He says this.

He says truly, truly. I'm telling you the truth man. Unless one is born again. Then he cannot see the kingdom of God. Now we haven't got the whole conversation here.

[ 12 : 04 ] Have we? No doubt these are only the notes of the conversation. But even though it's a. Even then it's a startling way isn't it? To turn the conversation. It is very, very blunt. It is very straight.

It is very direct. And Jesus I think is drawing out a couple of things. By this statement. That are still really important to you.

As we understand the kingdom that Jesus has sought to bring in. As we come to understand this new covenant. That he is bringing into the world. Can you see it's not just a matter of more teaching.

Of course. Jesus does bring. Doesn't he? More light into the world. Of course Jesus brings more teaching into the world.

But Nicodemus has come to him on those terms. It's as though Nicodemus is coming to him and saying.

[ 13 : 04 ] Listen good teacher. We see that you'll come from God. We recognise that. What about if we work together? We realise.

In the Jewish ruling council. All is not well. We realise in listening to you. That many of the things that you say Jesus. Well they're valuable. Valuable criticisms. We value the feedback.

Can we not get together? Can we not reform Judaism? We shouldn't fight one another. But can't we. Can't we walk the same road?

We're all about the same thing. Can't we. Reform the temple. Work together. Work together. Work together in new teaching syllabuses. For the synagogue. Produce a new and an enlightened. A better Israel. Jesus denies that is possible. Because Jesus is not just a greater and a better teacher.

[ 14 : 08 ] Jesus is bringing to people the power of God. And the need for new birth. Because there's no other way. Into his kingdom.

And that needs to be said to you this morning. Isn't it? I don't know why you've come this morning. But your need and my need is not reformation.

It is not tidying myself up. It is not turning over a new leaf. It's not trying my best. Trying harder. There were many people.

Weren't there in Israel. I'm sure there were many people. Who knew there was a need of reform. There were many people. Who would be willing to listen to Jesus on his podcast. As a great reformer.

With very valuable things to say. They were willing to see great things had to change. In the synagogue. And in the temple. But they were not prepared for what Jesus brought. It's not evolution.

[ 15 : 12 ] But it's a revolution that's needed. Something completely new. The power of God. A new kingdom. And so Christianity.

This Christian covenant. This new covenant. Is not just advanced teaching. It is new life. I think the other thing that Jesus talks about. Is here.

He's saying. The covenant that I have come to bring in. This kingdom. Is not an earthly kingdom. It's not to do with descent. Your descent. It's not to do with your ancestry.

It's not to do with the flesh. We're told that in John 1 verse 13. Aren't we? We had a preview of it. Chapter 1 verse 13. Children of God. Who were born.

Not of blood. Nor of the will of flesh. Nor of the will of man. But born of God. And so this is not a matter of natural descent.

[16:11] It's not children born of a certain lineage. Or human decision. Or a human's will. But born of God. It's a theme right the way through the gospel.

We'll see it. John 18 verse 36. Where Jesus says. My kingdom. Is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world. My servants.

Well they would have been fighting. And this is absolutely revolutionary. Isn't it? To the people who heard Jesus. And the people who first read Mark's gospel. John's gospel. Because the old kingdom. Of God. The kingdom of Israel. Was in this world. It had boundaries. And God went before his people. In those days. They fought against the Canaanites.

The Philistines. And God went with them to fight. That is the kingdom of which Nicodemus. Is a descendant. And a proud descendant. That is his history.

[17:10] But now he is told. You see. There is a new birth. There is a second birth. It's not natural to say.

Jesus answers him. Doesn't he. In verse 5. Of chapter 3. He says. I tell you the truth. Truly. Truly. I say to you. Unless one is born of water. And the spirit. He cannot enter.

The kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh. Is flesh. And that which is born of spirit. Is spirit. And I think. This is one of the reasons.

Why this chapter. Has had. So much use. In church circles. Throughout the history of the world. Because. You look through church history.

And this chapter. Has. Been used. As many. As much as any other. Chapter. To bring people to faith. More people have been converted. Through the preaching of John 3. Than any other chapter.

[18:09] People have been brought up. To go to church. Church people. You've been in church. All your life. And it's possible. To think that there's some kind of. Churchianity. But Jesus says. No. There's something more. That is needed.

And for them. It was a great shock. To hear of the new birth. In the 18th century. George Whitefield. The great preacher. In the UK. And the US.

He preached consistently. Persistently. Again. And again. From John 3. His sermon had one text. You must be born again. Somebody said to Mr. Whitefield.

Why must you go on. About. You must be born again. And Whitefield said. Because you must be born again. That's a good answer. Isn't it? And there are many people.

Sitting in churches. Like you are this morning. And you think. Well as long as I've got. The right heritage. As long as I've got. The right descent. As long as I've got. The right flesh. The right outlook. As long as I've got.

[19:09] The right teaching. As long as I've got. The right behaviour. Jesus says. No, no, no. You need to be born again. I think in this church.

There is a right emphasis. On God's covenant. That God promises. That I will be your God. And you will be my people. And I will be the God of your children. The promises of God.

Are for us. And for our children. But the danger with that. Is that we don't emphasise. The supernatural work. Of God. In being born again. And so children of this church.

Have you understood that? It's possible to be in a church like this. To enjoy a church like this. And enjoy the kind of social side of it. Maybe enjoy the teaching.

Enjoy being here. And yet not be born again. Tragically we know. Don't we? It's possible to go through. Church membership classes. To be able to speak.

[20:10] And give. A testimony. And yet not be born. Again by God's spirit. And so what Jesus says here. Is not to be brought out of its context.

And applied today. Without reference to Nicodemus. Nicodemus stands. As a man who knows the teaching of the Old Testament. Like many of you do. Who treasures the kingdom of Israel.

And rightly so. And against that background. Comes the shattering news. It is not enough. A new day is dawning. You must be born again.

You must be born again. There is no other way. To enter the kingdom of heaven. Let me try and answer some questions.

Hold on. I want to say. This is normal Christian teaching. I get nervous. Don't you? You know when somebody. You say to somebody. You pluck up the courage.

[ 21 : 14 ] And you say. Are you a Christian? You say to them. I'm a Christian. And then they say to you. Are you. Are you one of those born again Christians?

What's your reaction at that point? You want to say. Not like you're thinking. Isn't it? It's so difficult. Isn't it? But this teaching of Jesus. Is. This is normal. Christian teaching. It's not abnormal. It's not just John.

You can go to. Matthew. Mark. And Luke. If you don't believe it. You can go to Matthew. Mark. 13. Verse 14. You find exactly the same thing. Jesus comes preaching. The kingdom of God. And. We enter it. Not by natural birth. But by repentance. And faith. And if you don't think. This is normal. Christianity. That is because.

[ 22 : 08 ] You've probably spent. Too much time in churches. Not being taught. The central things. Of the Bible. This is normal. Christian teaching. You must be born again.

It's not like. After school club. You know. Like drama. After school. Or swimming lessons. In the holidays. It's a must. It's an obligation. There is no other occasion. To heaven. If you haven't been born again.

You will not get into heaven. And this is the Old Testament's teaching too. Jesus says. This is in verse 10. Look what he says to Nicodemus.

He says. Are you the teacher of Israel? You're a teacher of the law. And yet you don't understand this? Why should Nicodemus understand this? Why should he know better?

He should know better. Because. This doctrine of regeneration. Which is just a word for being born again. That's the promise. That was contained in the Old Testament. Of the New Covenant.

[ 23 : 10 ] At the heart of the New Covenant. Is the gift of God's Holy Spirit. Jeremiah said it. Ezekiel said it. In chapter 36. I will sprinkle clean water on you.

And you shall be clean from all your uncleanness. And from your idols. I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart. And a new spirit. I will put within you. And I'll remove the heart of stone from your flesh.

And I'll give to you a heart of flesh. And I'll put my spirit within you. And cause you to walk in my statutes. And be careful to obey my rules. Isaiah said it. Ezekiel said it.

Jeremiah said it. The mark of the New Testament. The mark of the New Covenant. Is this gift of the spirit. And every Christian. Must know. The gift of the spirit.

Must know the power of the spirit. In his life. Or not be a Christian. The gift of the spirit. New life in the spirit.

[ 24 : 05 ] New birth in the spirit. It is the birthright of every Christian. If you've believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. In your heart.

And you confess him with your mouth. Do you realise you are indwelt by the spirit of God? It's not only normal teaching.

It's not only Old Testament teaching. But it is heavenly teaching. It is teaching from God. Don't believe the cults.

Joseph Smith. And his magic spectacles. Translating the Book of Mormon. Mohammed. When he's about 40. Receiving visions. Or hearing voices. And angels appearing to him.

Buddha. Sitting under the tree. The body tree. Achieving enlightenment. The message of Christianity. Is to believe. No one in the whole world.

[ 25 : 03 ] About God except Jesus. Look at verses 11 to 13. As we round up. Why are you to receive this teaching?

This rabbi. Has spent. Probably about. 20 years. Fixing coffee tables. And broken chairs. This carpenter.

Has never been to college. This rabbi. Why should you listen to him? Why should he teach Nicodemus. This esteemed Jewish scholar. Verse 13. No one has ascended into heaven.

Except he who descended from heaven. The son of man. Where have you read that before? Come on. Where have you read that before?

It's chapter 1 verse 51. Isn't it? It's chapter 1 verse 51. And he said to them. Truly truly. You will see heaven open.

[ 26 : 08 ] And the angels of God. Ascending and descending. On the son of man. And Jesus. Stands there. As the ladder to heaven. He alone. Could go up to heaven.

And bring down this truth. He is not a teacher on earth. Jesus isn't surrounded by books. In the library. And research assistants. Bringing in the work of other people. He's not like that. He's not like Nicodemus. Nicodemus has to burn the midnight oil. He has to study to understand revelation. But Jesus comes from heaven. He doesn't read a single book from the rabbi. To teach him what he has to teach. Because God has told him what to say. God's word is his word. His word is God's word. He comes down from heaven. To testify from heaven. He is the only heavenly teaching.

This world has had. Of course. There was heavenly teaching. In the Old Testament. But here it comes. In its full light. And so this is what the coming of Jesus means.

[ 27 : 11 ] It means there's no need. For you and I to live in the darkness now. It's normal Christian teaching. It's Old Testament teaching. It is heavenly teaching. And so what is to be your response this morning?

Nicodemus might have sat there that evening. Marvelling at this conversation. And Nicodemus could have said. Couldn't he? He could have said. I believe you're right. I believe you're right. But Jesus will not accept that. Jesus does not ask you this morning. To agree with what he's saying. But verse 15. He asks that you would believe in him. Believe in him.

For eternal life. And there's all the difference in the world isn't there? Between believing in Jesus. And believing on Jesus. You can believe that Jesus taught the truth.

[ 28 : 20 ] You can believe what this passage is saying. But you need to come to the point where you believe on Jesus. And experience new birth.

You can believe what he says. And still not know the power. And that mysterious wind of the Holy Spirit. Which you can't always understand. And you can't always explain.

But we can certainly see it. In the result of a changed life. Of a new life. There's a great illustration there. Isn't there? In verse 14. It's Numbers 21.

And he takes you back to the people of Israel. In the wilderness. And there are snakes. Which have bitten the children of Israel. And they are dying all around them. And Moses is told. Take a bronze snake.

And put it on a stick. And everyone who looks to the snake on the stick. Will be cured. And will be healed. And there's no other hope.

[ 29 : 21 ] There's no other cure. Than to look to the bronze serpent. And Jesus says doesn't he. 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. And so what are you to do.

From this sermon. What am I asking you to do. I'm not asking you to do anything. I'm asking you to stop your doing.

And I'm asking you to sit there. And to look. To look. To look to Christ. To rely on him.

And to rest on him. John Payton. The great missionary to the New Hebrides. He's translating the Bible. He went as a missionary to cannibals. It's an amazing story.

[ 30 : 20 ] To a South Pacific tribe. And John Payton discovered they had no word for faith or trust. He was really battling with how to translate the word for trust or faith. And one day one of the natives who'd been running hard came into his house.

Flopped down into the chair beside John Payton. And said it's good to rest my whole weight on this chair. Payton said that's it. I'll translate faith as resting one's whole weight on God.

And it's as you look. And as you rest. And as you rest your whole weight on Jesus Christ. And rely on him. And be born again by God's spirit.

Let's pray. Amen.