

# John 3:1-21

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[ 0 : 00 ] From a barstool to that Evanrood, from Sunday morning in a church pew to a deer stand, or in a hayfield, or an interstate back to Nashville, in a Chevrolet with the windows! Me and him just riding around. Sometimes, whether I'm looking for him or not, that's where I find God. If you're not into Larry Fleet, you should be. He's a country singer, but that is the chorus of one of his songs, Where I Find God, where he talks about all the different places where he meets God. But what actually happens when you come face to face with the living God? Yes, he's everywhere in the world that he made by his Holy Spirit.

He's present everywhere. But what happens when you come face to face with him? We said last week there's a renewed interest in our culture in God. But what would it look like? What actually happens when you meet him? We can talk about him. We can talk about it as a concept. We can lament the things about what a relationship with him brings that are missing from our culture today. We can think about the cultural influence and say, you know, it might be better if we recovered some of that. But at root, what actually happens when an individual meets God? Well, the God of heaven came to earth. The eternal Word became flesh in the person of Jesus, and he showed us.

That's where we started last week in the evenings in this short series we're doing where people come face to face and meet God. And in John chapter 3 this evening, he meets a man called Nicodemus.

Nicodemus, what kind of person was this man? Well, we're told straight off in verse 1. Can you see chapter 3 verse 1? Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. There's quite a lot actually packed into that seven or eight word biography. On the one hand, we're told Nicodemus is a Pharisee. That means he's a member of a religious party that were fastidious about keeping laws that they had added to biblical law. In that respect, he is highly moral and religious. On the other hand, we're told that he's a ruler of the Jews. This meant that he was part of the governing, ruling elite of the day. He is, as one commentator says, wealthy, powerful, and born into an honorable and influential aristocratic family. Nicodemus, therefore, is at the center of the Judaism of the day, and he represents that world most clearly. Now alongside this, we're also told then in verse 2 that he came to Jesus by night. Can you see that? Jesus, this man came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi, we know, etc., etc. He came by night. That detail is not random. One of the themes that John has emphasized at the start of his gospel is the contrast between darkness and light. If you read chapter 1, that's very clear, darkness and light. That contrast is important in John's gospel. Jesus is the light that comes and shines into the darkness, a darkness that has not received him. So the fact that this meeting happens in the dark shows where Nicodemus stands. He is a representative of collective religious and cultural opposition to Jesus. And this is borne out in the way he speaks. Verse 2 again,

[ 3 : 38 ] Rabbi, we know that you're a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs unless God is with him.

That's a kind of tone that I think we should read that. Now some paint Nicodemus as a genuine inquirer, a humble man who comes to Jesus quietly. It would have been shameful for him to come publicly to see him. So he finds a time at night and he comes to him genuinely looking into the truth about Jesus. But that's not the case. His question comes with that kind of faux flattery that you get someone who thinks that they're superior to the person that they're speaking to. A certain kind of English person does this. It's a cultural thing. Now, of course you'd know this better than me, they might say, when they know full well that they don't think you know more than them about this. Effusive praise of somebody. Flattery that they don't really mean. It's that kind of thing. He's not being genuine in the way he says it. But the second part of the statement is combative and

mocking. No one can do these signs unless God is with him. The implication being, remember, I'm one of the Pharisees, I'm one of this religious elite. God is with my group, not your group. You must be a fraud. That's the implication. Now, here's the thing. As a religious figure, Nicodemus has all the credentials. As a man, he has all the wealth and all the status. All the religious credentials, all the wealth, and all the status. But he comes to Jesus on his own terms, and he demands that Jesus explain himself. He stands in judgment on Jesus in the way he asks his question. And he approaches him as he would have approached every other situation in life, assuming that he has the control.

He has the power, and he is the one who is in charge in this exchange. Because of this, the narrative shows us that he doesn't just come at night, but he is actually in the dark, spiritually speaking. And the narrative does this, depicting Nicodemus in this way, showing him coming in this particular posture, with this particular posture, in order to show us that that same posture resides in every human heart. Now, the way that it is expressed will be different, but the idea that we are in charge in God's world, and that we come to God insisting that he meets our demands, is expressed in every human heart. If you're real, then do this. That kind of demand. Or, let me read the Bible, this is your word, well, I will be the judge as to whether or not I will accept this. What is that if it is not standing in authority over God? Making yourself God in God's world is the essence of sin. [ 6 : 58 ] That is the posture of all of our hearts. It's the default setting of the human heart. So, the question is, well, when you come to God like this, what does he do with that posture? Point number one, he confronts.

He confronts. Look at verse 3. Nicodemus comes with this posture, and Jesus says, truly, truly, that is, he's saying, this comes with all of my authority. Thus says the Lord, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Unless you are born again, unless you are born anew, or from above, the word could be translated that way, you cannot see God, and you cannot be part of his realm. Nicodemus laughs it off. Verse 4, don't be daft. Don't be daft. You can't be reborn.

It's impossible. He thinks it's absurd. So, Jesus repeats himself. Verse 5, truly, truly, same authority, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Being born again and being born of the water and the Spirit is two ways of saying the same thing. And Jesus here is alluding to Ezekiel 36. These are scriptures that Nicodemus should have known, and the passage in particular, Ezekiel 36, 24 and following, where God promises cleansing with clean water and a new heart and a new spirit when his Messiah comes, and he's saying that this miracle of God is what is needed to enter his kingdom. You can only know God, you can only see his kingdom, you can only be in a relationship with him if you have received this radical new birth that brings cleansing from sin and complete renewal. And it is from above. What that means is only God can give it.

The Spirit, verse 8, the Spirit who we can't control, he blows where he will, he is the only one who does this work. You can't achieve it yourself. Now, that would have been utterly scandalous to Nicodemus.

[ 9 : 15 ] Nicodemus couldn't be better credentialed. Every room Nicodemus went into, he was at the top table. If he needed something in church circles, he would make the necessary call and people would jump to his demands. Like an American megachurch pastor, if he put his hand out, somebody put what he needed into his hand. Wherever he walked, there was somebody behind him providing what he needed. In religious circles, he had a bag man, he had all that kind of stuff. If he wanted something in every other context that he went into, he had the wealth and he had the status to get it. I've met some rich people and they don't live like the rest of us. They don't. The normal rules don't apply. They get whatever they want.

For Nicodemus, there wasn't a door that he couldn't open until now. Because here is a door that no one can open. No religious credentials can open it. No wealth can open it. And no level of status can open it.

There isn't a contact on earth. There isn't an amount of money that you can pay. There are no credentials that you can leverage to get past this particular rope, to get right with the living God. Because of our sin, when we meet God, he confronts us. You can't do it yourself, he says. And what happens? When we're being told that we are excluded because of our sin, it is very uncomfortable. And Jesus goes on. He then turns the tables. Do you see on Nicodemus, verse 10, are you the teacher of Israel and you don't understand these things?

Oh, great religious credentialed man, you don't understand all this stuff that's in your Old Testament Scriptures? It's a put down. And he goes on. We speak of what we know. Only the divine Son can speak in the plural of Himself in this way because only He has experienced, verse 12, the heavenly things. And only He has come from that place, verse 13, descending to the earth.

[ 11 : 25 ] Only He can make God known. There is only one person you know who has the authority to tell us about God and to tell us about what God requires, and it is His eternal Son who has come to us from His very presence and is, in fact, God Himself. I was in a situation a while back where I was being accused of saying some things, and because I had said those things, I clearly meant these things.

I said this, so I must have meant this, and therefore that made me this kind of person. That's the way it goes, isn't it? When somebody accuses you of something, what they're saying is, you are this kind of person. I said in reply, I am not an expert in lots of things, let me tell you.

But if I am an expert in anything, it is me and what I think about things. There is only one true expert in what God is like and what He thinks. There is only one expert in what God requires, and that is Him. And He has made that known. He has made it known to us by coming to us in the person of His Son. Apart from Him, we are ignorant. We are ignorant of the things of God, and we are stuck, and we are cut off from God without hope in the world. But He has come.

And He has come for a reason. Can you see it? It's there in verse 14. What does He say? As Moses was lifted up, and 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.

He's doing it again. He's referred to Old Testament Scriptures that Nicodemus should have known, and He's referring again to the Old Testament. The Son of Man, He's saying, has come from the courts of heaven to be lifted up. Lifted up in the same way that in Numbers chapter 21 in the Old Testament, when rebellious Israel were given the hope of healing by looking in faith to Moses' staff when it was raised up and the staff was like a bronze serpent, so Jesus has also come to be lifted up. Jesus, the Son of Man, He's come to be lifted up. Not something that He would hold in His hand in the shape of a bronze serpent, but lifted up on the cross. And in being lifted up on the cross, He would bring eternal life to those who look to Him in faith. Back in Numbers 21, if people looked in faith to the bronze serpent, they would be healed physically.

[ 14 : 03 ] Well, Jesus is lifted up so that those who would look to Him in faith, believe in Him, would receive eternal life. Yes, there's a confrontation. When you meet God in your sin, He confronts you. But here we see a shaft of light has broken through.

Jesus doesn't leave Nicodemus. He doesn't leave us in the depths. And we read on. Secondly, what does He do? He confronts, but secondly, He comforts. He comforts. Verse 16, for God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. Now, whether these verses are the words of Jesus Himself or of John expanding on what Jesus has said in verse 15, we don't know. But this verse is the beating heart of all Christian truth. It is the most famous verse in the Bible. You might be in here this evening for the first time.

I think it's unlikely. Even if that's you, the first time you've ever been in a church that you haven't come across that verse. And it's famous because it switches the light on. Metaphorically, it switches the light on. Nicodemus is still in the dark, but it reveals the unseen motivation behind all that is going on in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. What is the motivation? The motivation of it all is the love of God. In the darkness of the world embodied here by Nicodemus, God's intentions are revealed. This verse gives us the expression of His love. He sent His unique Son into the world, into this place of rebellion that has so willfully rejected Him. The expression of His love is also then qualified by the purpose of His love that all He's done this, that all who believe in Him would not perish, but have eternal life.

The darkness and sin of the world are going to be judged, but God has provided a way out, and that provision is life. Here is the answer to the empty or performative religion that Nicodemus represented. All of that scrupulosity about morality and about religious observance, here is the answer.

And here is the answer to the darkness of our proud and self-reliant human hearts, the love of God. That's the answer. When we are confronted as we are by Jesus' verdict here, for honest, our hearts recoil. Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, hang on. When we are exposed, when our pride is exposed in this way, as Jesus does it, we feel aggrieved. There's something in all of us that

says, hang on a minute. When our true condition is laid bare as it is here, and we think either, how dare you, Jesus Christ, because we're still proud, or we think, you know what, you're right. What on earth can I do about the fact that my heart is like this? Well, God has provided a solution. He has provided a way out. God has provided in His Son the comfort of His love.

[ 17 : 25 ] And there is only one way out. Verse 16, believe in Him. That is the only way to not perish, but have eternal life. And you know, when you think about it for a moment, at its most basic, when you boil it all the way down, that is the answer to absolutely every problem we face in life. That's not an exaggeration to say that. If you think about it, most of our emotional struggles, many of the things that we would put in the category are mental health. They come back to issues about identity. We don't feel good enough. We don't feel worthy enough. We don't feel strong enough or successful enough.

We don't feel like we measure up in some way. And our identity is then kind of picked at and unraveled, and we come unstuck. Well, here's the thing. God loves you. The God of heaven and earth, who made it all with a word, and who holds eternity in His hands, tells you that He loves you. So, what does it matter what other people think? And do you know what? It doesn't even matter what you think about yourself, or what your CV says about you, or what your life achievements do or do not reflect about what you've managed to do, because the objective, true, only opinion that matters, because it is the only opinion that determines your life or your future, and eternity is a very long time, is that you are loved.

If that reality gets in there and in there and then from there to there, if you can get that into your heart, it transforms everything. Lots of us struggle in other ways. We worry about the future. We're uncertain about the future. Well, however hard things might get, in the Lord Jesus, eternity is open up before you, and eternity in the presence of His love and His acceptance and His blessedness that the children were hearing about. What about the fear of death? Lots of us struggle with the fear of death. Death is now just a bump in the road to eternity. Can you see we could go on and on? At its most basic, the love of God for you is the answer to almost every problem we face in life. I don't know if you remember, one of the greatest pieces of television in the history of the world, it was about five and a half years ago, Tyson Fury, the boxer, was nominated for Sports Personality of the Year, and apparently he'd said something on Twitter that annoyed people. They wanted him cancelled from the show, and the BBC went to his house, and the reporter caught him as he was driving out of his house in a little van. You remember this? And the guy goes up and he says, Tyson, it's the BBC, and he sticks a microphone in the window of the van. Tyson, it's the BBC. Do you have anything to say to the people who want you off the Sports Personality of the Year shortlist? Believe in the Lord Jesus, Christ, and you will be saved. What about you being stripped of your belts? You must be very unhappy with that. What's your reaction to that? Jesus loves me. He loves you too. He loves you too. He loves these guys in here with me. All you've got to do is repent of your sins, and you will be forgiven.

Do you believe you can win spotty? Do you want to win spotty? John 3, 16. For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him, and he got it mixed up, he said, He shall have eternal life and shall not perish.

[ 21 : 27 ] Well, there's been a lot of criticism, Tyson, from people signing petitions, the Scottish National, all sorts of people. Just give us your take. Do you stand by your comments? Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.

It's a great bit of television, but here's the thing. It is also wonderful pastoral theology. Think what you like about Tyson, but in that moment, he spoke truth.

He's saying, I don't care about anyone's opinion. I don't care about losing my belts. I don't care because Jesus loves me. And the same is true for every struggle that we might have. When you strip it all back, the answer to that struggle is the love of God in Jesus Christ. God sent them into the world.

Verse 17, can you see? Not to bring condemnation, but salvation. And whoever, whoever, Nicodemus is the embodiment of every kind of rebellion against God, whoever, and you fit into that whoever, whoever, whoever believes is not condemned. If you don't take the offer, if you don't listen to Tyson Fury, if you choose darkness rather than light, verse 19, well, the alternative is clear. Look at verse 18.

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. God is God, and we're not. He owns the world. We do not. And as long as we treat him like he's our servant who exists to do our bidding, it is totally understandable that he would cut us off into the darkness.

[ 23 : 10 ] That's what happens personally, but it's also what happens at a cultural level. All of the chaos we see in our culture under secular government after secular government, the killing of the unborn, the destruction of marriage and family, the economic madness, all of those things, they're downstream from our rejection of the Lord Jesus. And don't kid yourself. When God tells us the truth about ourselves and then tells us that he has done everything needed to put that right, if we choose at that point to walk away, we are choosing the darkness, which is what we've done.

But we don't have to go that way. It doesn't have to be that way. And I want to plead with us this evening to turn back, to turn back and to receive the comfort of his forgiveness and his grace. What does turning back mean? Well, look at verse 21. You see, when we meet God, he confronts, he comforts, and then thirdly, he calls. Verse 21, but whoever does what is true comes to the light so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God. What he's saying is, he confronts us and says, we need to be born again because of our sin. He says, I've sent my son to deal with your sin in order that you can have eternal life and not perish. And then he says, well, then put this truth into action.

Do what is true. It's another way of saying, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Trust Christ with all that you are. Here's the thing. The person who is wedded to their wickedness stays in the dark because the light is shameful. I can't come into the light. Keep it in the shadows. Hope my search history doesn't get hacked. I can't admit to doing these things. I can't admit to being this kind of person. But the person who does the truth, the person who is trusting the Lord Jesus comes into the light knowing that it is the only place to escape shame. Do you know that? Do you know that? Although it feels hard to bring your sin out into the open because it is shameful, the light is the only place that shame can be dealt with because light is the only place that drives darkness away.

Shame. Shame hides in the dark, but it doesn't go anywhere. It ties you up. Guilt paralyzes you. You try to cover it. Try all kinds of things to deal with that shame, to deal with the guilt, but it won't go away and it is still there. As long as it stays in the darkness, it will remain and it will hold you in chains. I'll never forget, speaking to a member of my family days before they died, they had steadfastly refused to come into the light and they still felt guilt over things that they had done 60 plus years ago. It doesn't go away.

[ 26 : 13 ] If that's you, can I say, bring your sin and your shame into the light of Christ's love, to have it removed, to have the light chase the darkness, to have the chains taken off.

Have His forgiveness come and drive it out once and for all. You can't do that in your own strength. And that's why verse 21, when you do that, it is clear that you have met God and God is at work in your life. Do you see that verse 21? But whoever does what is true comes to the light so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God. The one who does the truth does it because God is at work. Will you heed Christ's call?

See the difference? There's a difference between the person in verse 20 and the person in verse 21. The difference is this. The actions of the wicked reveal who he really is. The actions of the one who turns to Christ reveal who God really is. See the difference? The one who does the truth reflects the grace and mercy of God. Do you know this refuge? If you don't embrace the love of God today, you can do it this evening. You can do it in your seat. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will not perish but you will have eternal life. And for those of us who have done that, remember that this love completely shapes everything about your existence. And because of that, that love is something that you should let into every corner of your life. It should influence how you think about absolutely everything. Make the choice every day to live in the truth and to walk in the freedom that this life gives. And this love is not something to hide. It is something to proclaim. Be like Tyson. Tell people,

God loves you, He loves you, and He loves you. So believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Don't be embarrassed. Don't be ashamed. You have the hope of the world. So share it around. And as you do that, a life lived in this freedom, a life lived in the joy that comes of that, and a life lived just passing it around, sharing it with others, doing what is true, is not only the best for us, but it all rebounds in the end to the glory of our God. Let's pray together.

Amen.