

Text: John 2:23-3:21

Title: "Believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, because
He is the saving gift of the Father's love"

Time: 2/4/2024 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: On January 8, 2009, the Florida Gators won the college football national championship game. They were quarterbacked by Tim Tebow, who became a Heisman winner, but who more importantly is a Christian believer. To spread the gospel, Tebow wore the Bible reference *John 3:16* under his eyes during the game. He later learned that 94 million people had Googled that Bible reference during the game.

In 2012, exactly three years after the Gator championship game, Tebow led the Denver Broncos to victory over the Pittsburgh Steelers in the AFC Championship game. In that game, Tebow passed for 316 yards, his pass average yards per completion was 31.6 yards; he ran for 3.16 yards per carry; the TV rating for the game was a 31.6, and the Bronco's time of possession of the ball was 31.6 minutes. Again, over 90 million people had Googled the Bible reference under the quarterback's eyes, and it was the number one trending phrase on Facebook and Twitter that day. As sportscasters highlighted the 3:16 coincidences of the game, Tebow simply said, "Big God" [<https://www.christiantoday.com/article/tim-tebow-shares-amazing-story-about-john-316-and-the-miracle-of-numbers/102853.htm>].

It was, of course, the Apostle John who authored the 16th verse of this third chapter of his Gospel, along with all the other verses in this work of 21 chapters, and the Lord had him do so for a singular purpose, that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing we might have life through His name (20:31).

In our passage, John tells us to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and have life in His name, because Jesus is the saving gift of the Father's love. That is what John 3:16 says, along with the rest of the passage. This morning I want us to see three things from this passage about the saving gift of the Father's love.

I. Miraculous signs were not the saving gift of the Father's love (2:23–3:2).

Illustration: How is it that nearly 200 million people in the span of 3 years can Google John 3:16 and our world still be as lost as it is? Well, the quarterback's markings were an effective sign, but John is clear in our passage that not even true signs, not even "big God" providential ones, qualify as the saving gift of the Father's love. They merely point us to the gift.

Application: This account, which is summarized by John in the much-Googleed verse 16 of chapter 3, begins with what John says about Jesus's time in Jerusalem at the feast of the Passover in 2:23. You may remember that, earlier in chapter 2, Jesus had cleansed the temple of the money changers. Zeal for God's house had consumed Him (v. 16). Passover was the time when all of the leaven, representing evil, was to be purged from the house of the Israelites, and Jesus purged the evil He encountered in His Father's house, the Jewish temple.

That forceful act, along with other miracles or signs which Jesus had done, convinced many to believe in His name (v. 23). But John explains that this miracle-driven response was deficient in an important way. Jesus could see what was in the faith of these many, and He saw something was missing. Something more than faith in signs is needed to save the soul, and so John writes about one of these many who believed in this deficient way, named Nicodemus, so that we could see where the deficiency lay in his heart, and to test whether a similar deficiency troubles our faith in Christ.

One commentator speculated that Jesus was staying at a home that John's family owned in Jerusalem. In John 19:27, Jesus tells John from the cross to care for Mary, His mother, and the text says, "From that hour that disciple took her unto his own home." That home was likely in Jerusalem. If so, it likely would have had a guest-chamber on its roof called an *Aliyah*. Access to the roof chamber could be had without going through the house by means of an outdoor staircase.

Verse two tells us specifically that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, a detail remembered in other passages of John's Gospel that mention Nicodemus (7:50 - KJV; 19:39). When we remember the way Christ had treated the temple establishment that week, and then factor in Nicodemus's position on the Sanhedrin as a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews, we can see why this episode happened in the cover of night.

Perhaps what is more important for our own lives this morning is the observation that, of the many with deficient faith placed in the miracles of Jesus from 2:23, John chooses to tell us about the need of a devout and respected religious leader. If Nicodemus's faith in the miraculous signs of Christ, not to mention his lifetime of good deeds, was not enough to save his soul, then it will not be enough to save ours either.

Nicodemus begins, "Rabbi, we know You are a teacher come from God, for no man can do the miracles you do unless God is with Him" (v. 2). And yet, the miracles were not the saving gift of the Father's love. Nicodemus needed more.

II. The gift of life is the saving gift of the Father's love (3:3-8).

Illustration: My daughter had an encounter with a stranger at the grocery store who was a bit cynical about parenting children. The wife of the couple remarked how precious and cute her kids are, but the wife's husband then protested, "But they will grow up and break your heart." Where this cynic finds

evidence for his protest, it is the work of our enemy, not the Lord.

Application: The Bible is clear that the birth of new life is a gift from the Lord, that the fruit of the womb is His reward (Ps. 127:3-4, “Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward. As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth”). The Lord wants us to be hopeful and not cynical in regard to the birth of children. These gifts of life are His gifts.

Without being asked a question, and knowing what was in Nicodemus as 2:25 explains, Jesus answers Nicodemus with an emphatic and abruptly put truth: “Truly, truly, I say to you, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v. 3). So what was lacking in Nicodemus’s sign-oriented faith was a new birth of new life. It is this gift of life that is the Father’s gift of love.

The word that is translated *again* in Jesus’s statement ordinarily means *from the top* or *above*. For this reason, many conclude (as do I) that Jesus meant Nicodemus to understand that he had to be born with life *from above*. But like our idiom *take it from the top*, the word can also mean *to do something again*, and it is clear that this is how Nicodemus decided to interpret the meaning of the Lord’s words (v. 4).

To clarify for Nicodemus, Jesus proceeds to use an analogy to help him understand that being born above does not have anything to do with being born again physically. He calls being *born above* being *born of water and spirit* (v. 5).

Then Jesus explains that flesh is flesh (the way Nicodemus interpreted Him – being born again physically) and Spirit is Spirit (the way Jesus intended to be understood when He said *born above* – being born above is the birth of spiritual life).

There are many different interpretations of the phrase *born of water and spirit*. Before I tell you which one I agree with, I want to note four facts that need to guide our conclusions about what Jesus meant here:

(1) Just like *enter into the kingdom of God* is parallel to *see the kingdom of God* in verse 3, so also is the phrase *born of water and spirit* parallel to the phrase *born above* in verse 3. This means that *born above* and *born of water and spirit* refer to the same thing, just like *entering* and *seeing* the kingdom of God refer to the same thing.

(2) The phrase *born of water and spirit* has only one preposition (the second *of* is in italics in the KJV). In the Greek language, only one preposition is used in a phrase like this when the author is talking about two labels for the same thing rather than two different things. So the phrase *born of water and spirit* describes a unity, not a diversity – the water and spirit are the same thing in some sense.

(3) Jesus believed that Nicodemus should have known what *born of water and spirit* meant, because Nicodemus was as a teacher of the Old Testament (v. 10).

(4) Jesus introduces an analogy or two symbols here, one of which He expands in verse 8, where He speaks of wind blowing (*spirit* in vs. 5 is the same Greek word as *wind* in vs. 8).

For these reasons, I agree with interpreters who believe that the phrase Jesus uses in verse 5 actually means *born of water and wind*. Introducing an analogy for being born from above, Jesus tells Nicodemus that being born above is just like being given new life through water and through wind, as described in the Old Testament. The Lord was likely thinking of Ezekiel's use of both of these symbols in his prophecy about God's saving gift of new life. This is why the Lord expected Nicodemus, as a teacher of the Old Testament, to know about these

symbols and understand their meaning. He expected Nicodemus to think of passages like Ezekiel 36 and 37, when He told this teacher of the Old Testament that he needed to be *born above* and *born of water and wind*.

Ezek. 36:25: "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you." That is the gift of a new life.

Ezek. 37:9, in order to give new life to the valley of dry bones: "Then said he unto me, 'Prophesy unto the wind, prophesy, son of man, and say to the wind, "Thus saith the Lord God; Come from the four winds, O breath [wind], and breathe [blow] upon these slain, that they may live.'""

In these and other passages throughout the Old Testament, water and wind are analogies for the gift of new life. This water can cleanse from filthiness and idols, and this wind can blow new life into those who are spiritually dead.

When this happens, the effects are undeniable (v. 8). Is it this water and wind that has washed you and blown new life into you? Are you someone born above? Have you been cleansed by the water of the Spirit from your filthiness and idols? Have you been given new life by the Spirit's salvation from sin? Do you now live with the blessings of one born above?

III. Jesus provides the saving gift of the Father's love (3:9-21).

Application: At this point, Nicodemus seems to be grasping the *what* of his need. It is not a need for just another teacher come from God who does miracles; he needs to be born with life from above. He needs the gift of new life, the gift of the Father's love. And so now he asks about the *how* (v. 9).

How indeed. That is a tremendous question. How can we who are below be born above? How can a sinner be just before

God? How can the filthy and idolatrous be washed and the dead live again? Jesus tells Nicodemus how in verses 10-15. How this salvation happens involves three things:

1. We must listen to what Jesus says about heavenly things to be saved (vv. 11-13). Others have opinions about the how of obtaining heaven. Nicodemus had taught for many years that you have to be born in or converted to Judaism and do your best to obey the law to see the kingdom of God. You may have your own opinion about how you might make it there someday. Jesus says, "Put all those opinions aside and listen to what I am telling you about this." He came from heaven.

2. We must look to Jesus, lifted up on the cross for our sin, to be saved (v. 14). Jesus is referring to an episode in Numbers 21, where God had sent serpents among His disobedient people to judge them for their sin. When bitten the Israelites contracted a plague and died. In mercy, God told Moses to put a dead serpent on a pole, and all who looked to it would be healed, and so they were.

Jesus tells Nicodemus he would be lifted up in the same way the serpent was. He would die on a pole called the cross, and all who look to Him for salvation would be saved from the serpent's bite and the plague it left behind, Satan's temptation and our sin. And just like the dead serpent on the pole was the death of a killer, so also Jesus's work on the cross achieved the death of our death and crushed our serpent killer.

3. We must believe (v. 15). We must believe not just that Jesus did miracles or that He was a teacher come from God. We must believe that He died so we could be given eternal life. John explains the importance of this faith (vv. 16-21).

Conclusion: In Genesis 22, God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac with the words, "Take now thy son, thine only Son Isaac, whom you love." God provided a ram for Isaac.

Beginning in verse 16, John summarizes for us what he is trying to tell us in the account of Nicodemus, the one who came to Jesus by night. In that verse he calls Jesus the Father's *only-begotten Son*. That label is an echo of Genesis 22. John is saying that God the Father gave His Son, His only Son Jesus, whom He loved. Only this time, there was no ram to rescue the Son. The Son became the ram who rescued Isaac and you and me. And in light of that love, John 3:16 tells us why we must not reject this gift of God's love. It is that God wants us to not perish, but have everlasting life.

Will you reject the gift of God's love or receive Christ as your Lord and Savior? Are you perishing, or do you have life? Are you condemned, or are you saved? Have you believed, or have you believed not? Do you love darkness or light? Are your deeds evil or are they wrought in God? These are the questions asked of us by the offer of this gift of the Father's love, His Son, His only Son Jesus. Listen, look, and believe.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching