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ENTERING INTO JOHN 3

By telling Nicodemus this in such lucid, simple language Jesus sums up the entire gospel in one lovely sentence, so rich in content that, if a man had only these words and nothing of the rest of the Bible, he could truly by apprehending them be saved. They flow like milk and honey, says Luther, "words which are able to make the sad happy, the dead alive, if only the heart believes them firmly."

R. C. H. LENSKI

John 3:16 does not appear in isolation. In that respect, it really isn't an elevator speech but rather an amazing summary of the good news of God's love that flows through John's Gospel and the Bible.

The author, John, includes it in a larger story: the account of the religious leader Nicodemus visiting Jesus to

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ask some questions. John recounts the visit in chapter three, and he starts by explaining that Nicodemus was a religious higher-up—not just an educated member of a group called the Pharisees but also a member of the Jewish ruling council.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, perhaps because he was concerned for his reputation. Jesus was already a controversial figure, especially among the religious establishment. We don't know for certain why Nicodemus came at that time, but it leads to an interesting theory that the nighttime visit provoked Jesus' reference to light versus darkness to describe his life and mission in John 3:19-21.¹

We do know that the conversation with Jesus made some sort of lasting impact on Nicodemus, who reappears later in John's Gospel when he defends Jesus in front of his fellow Pharisees (John 7:45-52). He also appears after the crucifixion when along with Joseph of Arimathea (identified by John as a secret follower) he comes to anoint and bury Jesus in a decent, unused tomb (John 19:38-42). This association with Joseph of Arimathea implies that Nicodemus was also a secret believer. Perhaps he never left his religious post out of fear of the other leaders.

In their first meeting, Jesus gets right to the point in John 3:7, exhorting Nicodemus to be "born again." The famous nineteenth-century evangelist Dwight L. Moody contrasts the conversation of Jesus with Nicodemus in John 3 with Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan

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woman in John 4: “It is remarkable that Christ declares the need of an entire change of heart and nature to a man of highest honor, an eminent teacher, and a sincere inquirer; while he speaks the sublime truth ‘God is a spirit’ to an ignorant and abandoned woman [in] John 4:24.”²

Moody points out that sometimes the overtheologized or overphilosophized of us need the basic truth of God’s love spelled out in the simplest of terms. The brilliant theologian Karl Barth was asked in 1962 during a visit to the United States how he would summarize his essential belief. He replied: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”³

Jesus explains *born again* to Nicodemus, and he goes on to introduce him to the pursuing God who desires a relationship with those who have been born again by the work of God’s Holy Spirit into the family of God (John 3:3, 5, 7-8). Note that the phrase “born of the Spirit” (John 3:8) indicates that God is the one doing the work; we cannot spiritually “birth” ourselves. Jesus affirms the mysterious work of the Spirit of God in John 3:8 by comparing it to the wind—the impact can be heard, but the source and destination are unknown.

Jesus then describes his own deity as the one who came from heaven (John 3:13) and the one who will be sacrificed (John 3:14-15) so that those who believe will be saved. The reference to Moses lifting up the snake in the wilderness is an allusion to Numbers 21:4-9. While the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, the people grew impatient with Moses and God and they complained.

As punishment the Lord sent venomous snakes and many people were bitten and died. Moses prays for relief and rescue for the people, and the Lord responds. To provide salvation and healing, the Lord commanded Moses to craft a bronze model of a snake that was placed on a pole. Those who looked up at the snake—the symbol of salvation—lived even if they had been bitten.

The lifted-up symbol of salvation foreshadows the reference Jesus makes here to his death on the cross: when he is lifted up, all who believe in him will be forgiven and saved. In the Gospel of John the phrase “lifted up” refers to Christ’s sacrifice three times: here in John 3:14-15, again in John 8:28 (in reference to Jesus’ enemies lifting him up), and again in John 12:32 when Jesus claims that when he is “lifted up,” he will draw all to himself (see also Isaiah 52:13).

Following on another theme that permeates the Gospel of John, the dialogue of Jesus and Nicodemus refers to believing so as to have life or eternal life. The *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* offers extensive insights into the New Testament use of the words we translate as “life.”

Three different Greek words are used in the Gospels to convey different aspects of the concept of life. *Bios* refers to daily life and one’s resources for living. *Psychē* signifies the self-conscious individual self and can often be translated by a personal pronoun. *Zōē* usually denotes life as a gift from God and is often modified by the adjective “eternal” (*aiōnios*). . . .

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Zōē occurs thirty-six times in the Gospel of John. In eleven of these occurrences it is the object of the verb “to have” (*echō*) and is used in the context of a promise, invitation or statement about those who believe in Jesus (Jn 3:15, 16, 36; 5:24, 40; 6:40, 47, 53, 54; 10:10; 20:31). . . . In the Fourth Gospel life or eternal life is not limited to a future age but can be realized in the present by the one who believes (see Faith) in Jesus. John can still speak of life as future (Jn 5:28-29; 6:27; 12:25), but it is also something that one may possess in the present (Jn 5:24). . . .

The definition of eternal life in John is summed up in Jesus’ final prayer: “This is eternal life, that they might know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (Jn 17:3).⁴

Bottom line: John is telling us that eternal life—a living and vital relationship with God through Jesus—starts now. This belief and resultant life is the objective of the work of God described in John 3:16. We’ll explore this further in chapter nine.

Three other key details help us understand the context of how Nicodemus would have heard Jesus’ words. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus lived a spiritual life that focused on avoiding God’s condemnation. As a result, Jesus’ words about God’s love and “believing” so as to avoid condemnation (instead of “doing the right religious things”) would have been radical new ideas for Nicodemus (John 3:16-18, summarized by John in 3:36). We’ll explore this more in detail in chapter eight.

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As a Pharisee and a Jewish religious leader, Nicodemus's world revolved around the Jewish people, Jewish laws, and the restoration of Jerusalem. In light of this worldview, Jesus' reference to God loving "the world" and his use of the word "whoever" would have been shocking if not blasphemous to Nicodemus. The "whoever" of John 3:16, 18, and 21, and later in John 3:33 and 36, is a universal word. The good news of the Gospel is an invitation to everyone, everywhere.

And Jesus' reference to his own deity was a total opposite of Nicodemus's theology. In John 3:16, Jesus describes himself as the "only begotten" (KJV) or "one and only" (NIV) son. The Greek word *monogenēs* literally means "same genes" and could also be translated "unique" or "one of a kind." John uses the same word referring to Jesus in John 1:14 and 18 and again in 1 John 4:9 (an echo of John 3:16): "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his *one and only* Son into the world that we might live through him" (emphasis added). The phrase "only begotten" from the King James Version indicates that Jesus possesses "every attribute of pure Godhood."⁵ Hebrews 1:3 states, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word."

JOHN 3:16 AS THE MISSION OF GOD

We Jesus followers are called uniquely and specifically to fulfill our part in God's global mission. But to understand

our roles, we first need to understand the mission of God into which we are summoned as disciples of Jesus.

I'm suggesting that John 3:16 clearly and succinctly describes that mission. In it, we are introduced to the missionary heart of God: the God who *seeks* after lost people, *sacrifices* to pay the penalty that we deserve, and *sends* us out to carry out his mission in the world.

To summarize the chapters ahead:

“For God”: God is the great initiator of mission. He is the starting point, the pursuer of Adam and Eve in the garden. In the person of Jesus, he comes “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10).

“So Loved”: Love is the motivation for mission. God’s first message is not condemnation or accusation but love. Unlike most deities of other world religions who provoke fear or demand submission, the pursuing God of Christian faith reaches out to us in love.

“The World”: Our entire human population—and even creation—is God’s concern. The whole world, all peoples and nations and tribes and languages, is loved by the God who wants everyone to know and respond to that love. The word used for world, *kosmos*, is replaced as “nations” (*ethnē*) in Matthew 28:18-20 and Luke 24:47, but Mark 16:15 refers to “all creatures” or “all creation” (*ktisei*), going past the idea of the human world to all of the living creatures and creation. Tradition indicates that Mark 16:15, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation,” was the trigger for Francis of Assisi’s love of creatures and creation.

“That He Gave”: Sacrifice is the foundation of God’s mission. For salvation to come, God had to give his son as the sacrifice for our sins. And if the good news of salvation and the kingdom of God is going to be spread all over the world, then we, the people of God, will need to make sacrifices—personally, socially, financially, and physically.

“His One and Only Son”: Jesus is the pivot around which God’s mission revolves. Salvation is found in no one else. Jesus is the mediator, the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to God but through him (John 14:6 and 1 Timothy 2:5). In our pluralistic world, we want Jesus to be one among many options. But the Bible affirms that Jesus alone is the savior sent by God.

“That Whoever Believes in Him”: The mission of God offers an invitation and calls for a response. We understand God’s love, receive his forgiveness, and choose to follow.

“Shall Not Perish”: God’s love blends with his judgment, and as a result condemnation is the consequence of disbelief or rejection of Jesus (John 3:17, 36). God’s mission is not just a happy invitation to a relationship with God followed by eternal bliss. It also includes a warning to flee the wrath that is to come—judgment, condemnation, and hell.

“But Have Eternal Life”: God’s mission is eternally significant for us all. His love, initiative, and sacrifice call us into a relationship with him that will last forever.⁶

We will explore each of these eight components of God’s mission and discover where we fit in it.

NEXT STEPS

- Reread John 3, especially the Jesus-Nicodemus dialogue. If you were sitting there with Nicodemus, what questions would you want to ask Jesus?
- Reread the above summary about the upcoming chapters. Which chapter do you look forward to reading most? Which chapter already sounds troublesome?

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