

RUF Bible Study – John
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John 3 – The New Birth

We've come to one of the most important and most famous chapters in the whole Bible. John 3 has changed lives, and if we wanted to simply start telling John 3:16 conversion stories, we'd be here for awhile.

My friend Ricky Jones tells a story of a man who needed paper to roll his own smokes. Someone gave him a New Testament and said he could use the paper as long as he read every page before he smoked it. He smoked through Matthew. He smoked through Mark. He smoked through Luke. And he smoked through the first two chapters of John. But at John 3, he was converted to new life in Jesus.

I knew a woman who hadn't grown up in the church and wasn't a Christian. She was at a World Series party with friends, looked over at the game and saw someone holding a John 3:16 sign behind home plate. "Why do people do that?" she asked, a fair question. "No one even knows what that means." Uh. Well, there she was wrong, and the Christian friends around told her what it meant. She was converted to new life in Jesus Christ.

This is a powerful verse and a powerful story in John. It's Jesus' first real interaction with anyone from the group of Pharisees, the group that becomes his nemesis. It's the first extended conversation with anyone he has. We're at the beginning of his ministry.

But before we begin, let's pause and admit that our current evangelical culture is obsessed with John 3:16 to the point that many of us are turned off to the message. Our Christian marketing culture has taken that verse and those like it and put it on every possible thing that could be silkscreened.²

There are Testamints candy. There are John 3:16 golf balls so you can witness to someone when you shank your golfball and can't find it. There are "Smiling Cross" blankets and tshirts. Of course the "witness wear" – God beat Satan with an ugly stick, Modest is Hottest, Do the Jew (really?!), My other tshirt says Jesus Loves You, and I can go on and on. Bibleman is just awful. Veggie Tales are really morality lessons by vegetables. Well done, but nothing about the gospel or redemption.

The Jesus junk people buy is truly embarrassing. Maybe you've grown up with it, as if the message of the gospel can be captured on a pewter key chain. Maybe this is a part of what has turned you off about Christianity. If so, I would understand. I can't stand it either.

However, that is not the real thing. It's a way to keep the real thing away from our hearts. What is the real thing? Let's look at the passage today. These next two chapters (3 and 4) form a unit in my understanding. This week we'll be talking to insiders and next week the outsiders. This week we'll talk about the privileged and next week the outcast. The message of the gospel of Jesus is for both.

Nicodemus, you

I'm going to use a sentence as my outline. Here it is: *Nicodemus, you must be born again by the Savior.*

Remember John 3 comes on the heels of John 2. In John 2, Jesus did some fairly provocative things. He turned water into wine, which was a nice feat. We discussed how it was so much more than that, but word must have gotten out about what had happened. Then Jesus created quite the scene when he went ballistic at the temple. Again, we discussed what he really meant when he did that, but most people wouldn't have known about the explanation.

Jesus was attracting a fair amount of attention. He needed to be "handled." So Nicodemus shows up one night. We can tell he's representing a group when he says, "We know..." He's not only giving his opinion, but he's speaking for the group. He's trying to work with Jesus, to bring him into the mainstream, to tell him he's a young man who has potential if he'll only let them help him.

Who is Nicodemus, and for whom is he speaking? We know a few things about Nicodemus. He was an old, rich, smart, religious man. Obviously he was a man. He was a Pharisee, a member of the religious elite of the day, the smart, holy people who took the bible seriously. Later, in 3:10, Jesus calls him "the teacher of Israel" which must have meant he was at the top of the heap in the group of Pharisees. You got there by being smart and rich, and lasting awhile. This is like someone with

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Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Doug Serven, © Doug Serven, 2008, website: www.ouruf.org. For this series, I used commentaries on John from Boice, Skip Ryan, Gary Burge, D.A. Carson, Hughes, Wright, Calvin and Leon Morris and listened to sermons by as many people as I can find, especially Tim Keller, Ricky Jones, Fred Harrell and Scott Sherman. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

² A must read: *Rapture Ready!* By Daniel Radosh and the accompanying website: getraptureready.com. Radosh observes this culture from an outsider's perspective. Just crazy.

an Ivy League PhD, renowned in his field. It's someone like George W. Bush – he's got the credentials, leadership skills and longevity to be whatever he wants.

Nicodemus knew his Bible. He was a scholar. And he respected Jesus. He says, "We know you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." That's a statement of respect and honor to Jesus.

This is the epitome of a cultural, intellectual, religious and powerful insider. That's the first thing I want you to see, because it matters to why Jesus says what he says to Nicodemus.

Let's put it this way: Jesus isn't talking to someone we'd expect him to talk to.

Many people think that Christianity is for people who are in trouble. The pimps, prostitutes and drug dealers. The convicts. Those who cheat on their spouses or abuse their children. They need the church to get their lives better.

Other people think Christianity is particularly suited for those who need more rules and structure in life. You know those people, the *rule people*. They love the rules.

Just last week I was with Michael Whitham sitting in the car talking about life and RUF and Jesus on one of the side streets just off of campus. The parking lady came up and told us we couldn't park there. "We're not parking," I said. "We're just talking for a minute." She looked at me. "You can't do that. You can't be here at all for any reason." Okay. I understand that that road is not supposed to be a pick up or drop off spot. But really??! This lady has the worst job ever – or else maybe she loves it. We think people like that must love all the laws, regulations and rules of Christianity. It fits them.

But Jesus won't let us think either of those things. First, Nicodemus isn't someone on the fringes of life. He's at the height of life. He's the kind of person you want to be. He's got a great job, degrees on his wall, a family, a following, a house with a pool. He writes books. He's smart. He has power. And yet he is getting the message of the gospel too.

Nicodemus doesn't need more rules. He loves rules. He has more rules than you can imagine. He's a Pharisee. He has rules about his rules. His life is orderly beyond what you can imagine. He has structures for his structures. He's not someone who needs more.

What about you? At the University of Oklahoma, we have many people just like Nicodemus, or ones trying build a life like Nicodemus. You may not be there, but you're on your way; you're constructing a life like that – money, power, position, credibility, luxury, privilege.

I want you to see yourself here. Nicodemus isn't a bad guy. He's studied the Bible and trying to do the best he can. After all, he's the one coming to talk to Jesus.

You are insiders, for the most part. You live in privilege. Do you know that most people in the history of the world would think your dorm room was the wildest, most extravagant home they could ever imagine? They would kill to live in a place like that. You've never missed a meal. You own a car, which puts you in the top 1/10 of 1 percent of people to live. You have had a tremendous education, including now, college classes, tons of free time, the luxury of study instead of grueling, grinding work. You have more clothes than you could ever wear. You have more shoes than you could possibly need.

You have heard the Bible. Most of you have. You know the stories. Just even owning a Bible is something amazing, but something you don't even think about.

Most of you are insiders. Some of you are even more insiders than others, and most of you want to be more insider than you are right now.

There are places in all of our lives, and there are some here who truly will be like the woman at the well in chapter 4, but I want you to identify with Nicodemus first. He didn't need more rules. He wasn't living on the streets. He respected Jesus, grew up with Bible stories, came from a good family, studied hard, got his credentials, tried to be a good person – and he needed to hear a word from Jesus. Just like you.

Must be born again

So hear Nicodemus is, talking to Jesus in the darkness. He's not a seeker even. He's not coming to Jesus with some emotional, spiritual, or life need. He's coming to Jesus out of respect and because he wants Jesus on his side. Not exactly the emotional, penitent heart stirred up at youth camp on the last night before you're about to leave.

What does Jesus say to him? Let's say first that he doesn't go into a theological treatise. He doesn't challenge Nicodemus' epistemological positions. He doesn't begin to argue about his stances on certain things.

Jesus gives Nicodemus a metaphor. He speaks in metaphors and similes quite often. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. I am the Bread of Life. I am the Living Water. Here he says, "You must be born again."

Born again. We've heard this so often, but do we know what it means? Often it conjures up bad connotations. Do you want to be known as a "born again Christian"? Rev. Tim Keller says that studies say (I haven't seen the studies for myself, but certainly believe them) that most people would prefer not to have a born again Christian as a neighbor. Ah, that's the person, as we said, who keeps the rules. She doesn't drink or smoke or have sex or go to parties – or like anyone who does. No fun.

Surely that's not the metaphor. In fact, that directly contradicts the metaphor, for Nicodemus *is* that person who follows all the rules, and he still needs to be born again. Jesus doesn't say, "Good job Nicodemus. You're a good person. Let me help you get the rest of the way."³

³ I'm really thinking of Keller's sermon here.

No. Jesus says, “You have to start all over. Nothing you’ve done counts. You’re back to square one. It’s like a whole new life, a whole new beginning.”

Being born again means nothing you’ve done counts. Your bad stuff doesn’t count against you, and your good stuff doesn’t count for you. You’re back to the beginning, like a baby. You don’t add Jesus to your life – you get a whole new life.

That can be terribly frustrating if you’re a person of privilege. If you’re down and out, one of the outcasts, then this sounds pretty good. There is nothing you’ve done that is so bad you are discounted. This is why throughout the history of the church, the outcasts have embraced this message. It’s a new start with a new life.

But if you’re in the elite, the privileged, then you think – wait a minute! That’s not fair. I’m a good person. I’ve kept the rules. I shouldn’t have to start over.

Jesus says you do. That’s why the rich, smart, privileged and insiders have had a tough time coming to and following Jesus. It’s why your heart is hard towards him, because you want to stand on your own merit.

Nicodemus is understandably confused. He doesn’t get the metaphor, or else is making a snarky comment to Jesus making fun of the metaphor. “Can you enter a second time into your mother’s womb?” Ew. No, Nicodemus. That’s gross.

Jesus explains that you must be born of water and of the Spirit. [See Ezekiel 36: 25-26] This birth *must* happen. You can only see and experience the kingdom of God if it happens to you.

Jesus then talks about how you can’t *make* it happen. Flesh is born of flesh and spirit is born of spirit. The wind blows where it wills, and you can’t control it.

Jesus is saying that this born-again-ness has to happen to you, but you can’t make it happen to you. You see, you’re a sinful person. You’re deceitful and corrupted. You’re worse than you think. So if you try to be a spiritual person, it just won’t work. You can’t make your life better. You have to be born of the spirit, not of the flesh. Your flesh can’t make spirit. It just can’t.

Rev. Tim Keller puts it this way. Imagine you wanted to get pears in your orchard. But you have apple trees. You think, I’m going to really water and fertilize the tree, I’m going to add all these good and healthy things into my life, so I can get peaches. What’s going to happen? You’re going to get bigger apples. Not peaches.

So you say, I’m going to prune the tree. I’m going to get rid of the bad things in my life, cut back and do better that way. What will you get? More apples.

Apple trees make apples. Flesh begets flesh. If you want peach trees, you have to start over, no matter how good or bad your apple tree was. You need the spirit. You need to be born again.

How do you do that? I’ve been present at four births, all my children. It’s a crazy, crazy thing. A beautiful and awe-inspiring thing, but still really crazy. There is yelling and screaming. There is blood and pain. There is activity all around, people attending to the mother, doctors coming and going, the father fainting.

What does the child do? It gets born. It is there, present for the whole thing. You can’t have the birth without the baby. But it’s the mom doing all the work, isn’t it. No one “gets born.” The spirit blows where it will.

If you see the point of the new birth here, then I want you to think about it. Jesus says that it’s for everyone, not just for “those people.” He says it’s for all, and that means it’s for you. All must be born again. All must start over and stop trying to add to their lives and righteousness. All must live out the new life, the new identity, putting away the things of the former life and living a new life.

You might have to wait and be born at the right time. You can’t make it happen. You wait for it and it comes when the time is right. You believe in Jesus. You come to him and listen to him. You talk to him, interact with him and try to figure out what he’s saying. That’s what Nicodemus did. He came with one reason and then left with a whole different thing to think about.

By the Savior.

Nicodemus, you must be born again by the Savior. That’s our sentence for tonight. We’ve looked at Nicodemus and you, considering how we fit the profile here in John 3. We’ve looked at what the born again analogy might mean for us, thought we admit we still don’t fully understand it. But what about the Savior? What does it mean to be born again by Jesus, if he is our savior?

First, see that Jesus is the mother here. He’s obviously not talking about physical birth, but spiritual birth. Later in John 16:21, Jesus says, *When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world.*

In that verse Jesus is talking about a women’s anguish in physical birth. He is making a point to his listeners. So too is it with me. And what have we learned Jesus is thinking about when he says the word “hour”? That’s John’s term for Jesus’ death.

This means that Jesus is the one who gives us new birth. It’s his pain that gives us life. His labor, his blood, his tears, his moaning. He dies to give birth to his people. Childbirth still is dangerous. We don’t see many deaths because our medical care is so much better, but don’t be fooled. It is fraught with danger.

Jesus is our mother here. He gives us new life. That’s our first clue that he is the Savior.

We also see he's the Savior because of what he tells Nicodemus: *No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

Jesus isn't just a good teacher, which is how Nicodemus is relating to him. He has come from heaven. That is amazing. And he is to be lifted up like the snake in the wilderness.

I don't have time to go into all of what that means, but it's from a strange and obscure story in the book of Numbers 21 where snakes invaded the land and were biting and killing everyone. God told Moses to build a bronze serpent, set it on a pole and lift it up for the people to see it. If you looked at the serpent, you were saved from the venom.

Jesus tells Nicodemus to think about that for awhile. He doesn't tell him God has a wonderful plan for his life and share the four spiritual laws. He doesn't draw out the bridge and explain how he's on the hell side because of sin and the one way he can cross over is by the cross. He doesn't give him a tract, or a Christian tshirt, or a VeggieTales or ask him to watch the Passion of the Christ.

He knows Nicodemus is a Bible scholar. So he tells him to think about the Bible for awhile. Think about Jesus as Savior instead of Teacher.

We need that. So often we come to Jesus as a teacher. This is the classic problem and situation of the intellectual (religious studies majors) and cultural elite. Jesus has some good stuff to say. If you sort out the things that have been added to him throughout the years, you can find a powerful teacher in there.

That won't change you. You may get motivated for a time to shape up your act. You might be able to muster up some more self-control for a time, but you're really not serving God at that point. You're serving yourself and your own idols. Your own goodness or morality. Jesus as teacher ultimately fails, for we don't really need more information on how to be good.

We need saving. Jesus isn't a teacher, but he's the savior. He doesn't add teaching and morality to your life. He gives you a whole new life. When you are working through an issue in your life, Jesus as Savior is the one who gives you transformative power.

Why? We've left this verse until the end. I didn't want to go straight at it because I'm afraid you have thought of it as cliché so often. Why and how do we know Jesus is Savior? John 3:16 tells us: *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 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 loved the world. That means he loved sinners. It doesn't mean he loves trees and the ocean and the Rocky Mountains, though he is glad about those things. He loves this sinful, sinful, broken world of people. He loves *you*. His love is deep, deeper than you could ever dream. His love is wide, wider than your sins. There is nothing you have ever done that cannot be forgiven. His love is redemptive. He doesn't just love on facebook, or say he loves you and then ditches you a few years later. He sent his son to die for you.

There is no real illustration that I can give to do justice to this. All acts of sacrifice point to this one, but none can fully show its depth and power of love. To send your son to die in order to save your enemies is astounding. That love should move you. Are you moved?

We're talking about believing faith here. That you understand that you need this new birth, that you need a Savior. And that you believe that Jesus is not merely a good teacher to be followed, but the Savior and Lord of all. That your life can be found in him, that his life can be found in you.

Friends, otherwise you will perish. You will remain in the dark. You will be condemned.

I am not asking you to believe in being a Christian. I am not asking you to believe in your baptism. I'm not asking you to believe in prayer you prayed. I'm asking you to believe that the eternal son of God became flesh, lived among us, lived the perfect life, died a death for us as our atoning sacrifice to make a payment for our sins, rose again from the dead on the third day, thereby proving he was God and conquering death, ascended to heaven and will return someday in all his glory. Do you believe in that?

All of you have a birth certificate somewhere, don't you?⁴ We recently had ours stolen so we had to get all of them replaced, which was a huge hassle. Six birth certificates – two from Missouri, two from Oklahoma, one from Nebraska and one from Michigan. But they came in the mail. Why do we need them? To prove we were born? Um – that seems rather obvious and redundant. Can you imagine if we framed our birth certificates, and then showed them to you every time you came over – "Yep, there she is. I was born..." There are reasons we need them (to prove ages in little league baseball and to get a driver's license I suppose are two).

The point is – are you living? Have you been born? Are you living that new life? Are things changing for you? Are you seeing the kingdom in a new and different way?

Or are you still living with and relating to Jesus in the teacher paradigm? Are you coming to him for knowledge and wisdom throughout the day, or are you coming to him for life, for saving? You need saving, friends.

⁴ Illustration from Wright

We don't know for sure about Nicodemus, but I think he slowly changed. It wasn't the dramatic conversion of Paul or the woman at the well in John 4. So often it's the smart people who don't come at all, and if they do it takes a long time.

But in John 19, after Jesus had been crucified, a rich man named Nicodemus and Jesus were the ones who took Jesus' body down, wrapped him in linens and spices and buried him in the tomb.

Why is that important? Because it was work for servants. Lowly work. To touch a dead body would have been vile and awful for a religious, rich and privileged man like Nicodemus. Why would he do it? He had seen the Son of Man lifted up. He had seen the Savior. He had seen the one who takes away the sin of the world. He had seen the teacher become the Savior. He had thought about it for a long time, and he finally saw that God so loved sinners, that he sent a man named Jesus not to be teacher, but to be Lord. I think Nicodemus believed and was saved.

Joe Purdy sings a jangly, fun song that has terribly true and sad lyrics:

I just can't seem to get it right today. I just can't seem to get it right today.

I just can't seem to get it right today.

I guess I'm gonna give up. Oh I guess I'm gonna give up.

You can't get it right. You can't measure up. You can't be good enough. It's more than just a lousy, rainy day.

Give up. Give over. Stop your striving. Stop your moralizing. Stop thinking Jesus is about rules and for "bad" people out there. Jesus is for you. He is the Savior, sent by God to love you. Believe in him.

Father, long before creation Thou hadst chosen us in love,
And that love so deep, so moving, Draws us close to Christ above.
Still it keeps us, still it keeps us. Firmly fixed in Christ alone.

Though the world may change its fashion, Yet our God is e'er the same;
His compassion and His covenant Through all ages will remain.
God's own children, God's own children Must forever praise His name.

God's compassion is my story, Is my boasting all the day;
Mercy free and never failing Moves my will, directs my way.
God so loved us, God so loved us That His only Son He gave.

Loving Father now before Thee We will ever praise Thy love,
And our songs will sound unceasing 'Til we reach our home above,
Giving glory, giving glory To our God and to the Lamb;
Giving glory, giving glory To our God and to the Lamb.