



There are well over 31,000 verses in the Bible and I don't think anyone would argue with the fact that John 3:16 is the best known verse of all. It's become such a familiar part of our culture that I'm sure many people have no idea where it comes from and what it says. John 3:16 has even become the focal point of urban legends.

Last year, for example, before a play-off game, Tim Tebow felt directed to write John 3:16 on top of his eye-black under his eyes. Until that day he'd always written Philippians 4:13. He went on that day and led his team to an amazing overtime victory. A short while after that game ended his coach ran up to him and said, "Tim! 94 million people read your eye-black and googled John 3:16! You had 316 passing yards with an average 31.6 yards per toss (which was also the length of the winning pass). Later it was discovered the ratings for that particular game were up 31.06%!" Even Tim Tebow was amazed and said, "It just had to be a God-thing!"

Maybe it was. People who know and love this verse do so because it's powerful. It speaks very clearly and profoundly about another God-thing, what we call salvation. It tells us what salvation really means. It tells us how and why it's possible. It tells us who it's for. No wonder that over 600 years ago Martin Luther called this verse, "the heart of the Bible; the gospel in miniature."

What I find interesting about John 3:16 is very few people, even Christians, know who came up with it. Was it Jesus or one of his followers? Who were those who first heard it? Was it a general audience or a specific person? Were there other things said along with John 3:16 or did that sentence come like a single bullet all by itself? If we're going to grasp the full meaning of this verse and all it teaches us about salvation we should really answer those questions. So turn with me to the third chapter of John.

The "What" of Salvation

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him" (verses 1–2).

It all started when a man named Nicodemus approached Jesus. John tells us a few things about Nicodemus. He was a very religious man; a Pharisee. The Pharisees were a select group of about 6,000 laymen who took their religion very seriously. Their name means "to separate" because that's what they did—they separated themselves from others because of their devotion to God. Nicodemus' whole life would have been devoted to keeping the

Ten Commandments and all the minute rules and regulations that went with them, things like sandal tying on the Sabbath. He was sincere about this; it wasn't just a show. As far as we can tell, he was good at it.

He was also a very powerful man. John says he was "*a member of the Jewish ruling council.*" That means he'd climbed the religious ladder to become a member of the Sanhedrin. This consisted of 70 men who were the Supreme Court of Israel. Though Palestine was occupied by Rome at the time, these men had a lot of power. They could have people arrested. They had their own police force. They had the power to judge in criminal cases. Most of them were also quite wealthy.

On top of all that, he seems to have been a brilliant teacher. Later, Jesus calls him "*Israel's teacher.*" It's not clear exactly what that means, but it's likely he was well-known. If he were alive today, he'd have written books, he'd have his own radio show, and he might have been interviewed by Katie Couric.

As a well-known teacher and member of the Sanhedrin he'd be interested in this country preacher who'd taken the people by storm. He'd made quite a scene in the Temple, throwing out the moneychangers; acting like he owned the place. There were signs, miracles no one could explain. So Nicodemus decided he must speak with this Jesus face to face and find out for himself. Perhaps there was a restlessness within him; a dissatisfaction with religion as he knew it. Perhaps he wants more. But he had to be careful. He knew his colleagues were threatened by Jesus. He couldn't risk being too closely identified with him. A man in his position, what would people think? So he came secretly in the darkness of night.

He addresses him in v. 2 with respect. "*Rabbi,*" he calls him. To the Jews it meant "teacher." "We've seen your work. Impressive signs! I can see God is with you." Sounds like a good way to start to me. No need to challenge him right off the bat. Show him you've done your homework. Most young men would be flattered by such a compliment from a man like this. But Jesus knew better. Just before this, John wrote something that applied to Nicodemus. At the end of chapter 2 he wrote, "*Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person*" (verses 23–25). At this point, Nicodemus was one of those people who Jesus saw right through. So Jesus didn't

respond by saying, "Oh, great Rabbi, thank you for your endorsement. I've heard so much about you, too. The approval of you and your friends means so much to me!"

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again" (v. 3).

Instead, Jesus responds with a startling statement. This sounds like it's coming out of left field, but it's not. Jesus knows Nicodemus believed in the Kingdom of God. He looked forward to that day when that kingdom would come. For Jews like Nicodemus, to see the kingdom of God was another way of saying that you'll see eternal life. The Jews believed this was their right as God's chosen people. And here was Nicodemus, a blue blood Jew, a teacher of God's law. Yet Jesus says, "None of that will get you in." Notice he begins with the words, "**Very truly I tell you...**" That's like a flashing red light. He's saying, "I'm about to tell you something of great importance. Here it is, Nicodemus: None of your religion matters. You have to start over. You have to be born again." This is like the Continental Divide of Scripture; the International Dateline of Faith. Jesus says you're either one side or the other.

Everyone today is familiar with the term "born again." It's been used for all kinds of things. If a football team has a losing season and the next year it does better, the sports writers say it's born again. I've heard couples say their marriage has been born again; it's like a fresh start, a do-over, a reload, a mulligan. But Jesus is talking about something more radical than any of that. He's talking about a complete transformation, becoming a brand new person.

John Wesley was a great preacher in the 1700's who preached all through Great Britain and North America. His favorite text was this, "You must be born again." Someone asked him once, "Why do you preach so often on "You must be born again?" His answer was, "Because—you must be born again."

That's what Jesus is saying. Nicodemus was doing his best to obey what he thought God wanted, but it wasn't enough. I think Jesus sensed in him a deep hunger, an emptiness. So the Lord says to him, "You can't enter the kingdom of God the way you are. You must be born again." This is the "what" of salvation. Salvation isn't about turning over a new leaf or getting a fresh start. It's about becoming a brand new person.

The "How" of Salvation

Nicodemus was a sincere man. He took things at face value and this didn't make sense to him. So he asks Jesus a few questions.

"How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" (v. 4).

There could be a note of sarcasm here. It's like, "Oh, I see. So you're going to take an old man like me and give me a recall to the maternity ward. I heard you changed water into wine, but come on!"

Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You[b] must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (verses 5–8).

Nicodemus had asked how this takes place. What Jesus says here is simple. He's says there's nothing you can do to make this happen; this is the work of God's Spirit in your spirit. The term "born again" can also be translated "born from above." It's clear from Jesus' answer that's what he means. To be born from above is to be born of the Spirit. There's nothing Nicodemus can do. It's something that has to happen to Nicodemus from outside himself. It's a work of God. I've been there when all three of my kids were born. Each time, while we were so happy to see them for the first time, no one congratulated them: "Great work there, little one!" Who says that? No, give the baby a pacifier, not a medal. Give the mom a medal!

Jesus isn't exhorting Nicodemus to do anything. He's explaining to him what must happen. There's nothing he can do to be born from above. Jesus says, "**Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.**" "Flesh" refers to our humanity. Flesh begets flesh. Flesh makes fleshly things. Flesh can't bring about this new birth. It must be done by the work of God's Spirit. You can't control that. That's why he uses the analogy of wind. The word "wind" is the word *pneuma*. It's the same word for spirit. "**The pneuma (wind, Spirit) blows wherever it pleases.**" The Holy Spirit moves in sovereign freedom. You can't control him. But you know he's there because you see his effects. You see the difference the Spirit makes. Here I am in Foster City. This is a wonderful city, but it's a windy city. No one has to tell you the wind blows where it wishes, right?

Many people wonder about the phrase Jesus uses "**born of water and the Spirit.**" That's one of those phrases that Bible scholars have debated over for centuries. I think Jesus has in mind an Old Testament passage which Nicodemus would have been familiar with. That's why Jesus says in verse 7, "**You should not be surprised**" by this. He should have remembered Ez. 36:25-27. God speaks to his people and says, "**I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.**" When Jesus talks of being born of water and Spirit he's thinking of how this new birth both cleanses and renews. Only God can do that. God says, "**I will sprinkle clean water on you... I will cleanse you...I will give you a new heart...**"

So the “what” of salvation is we must be born again. The “how” of salvation is that it’s a work of God’s Spirit in the human spirit. But Nicodemus still doesn’t get it. So he asks again in verse 9, **“How can this be?”** A better way to translate this is, “How can this happen?” You see, he’d taught for years the way you get into God’s kingdom is by keeping the law and being totally devoted to God. So this just doesn’t compute. I think he’s still wondering at this point what he has to do. So Jesus answers in verses 10–13.

“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.”

Let me paraphrase what Jesus says here. He starts by chiding Nicodemus and all his friends for not knowing what they should know, “You’re Israel’s teacher and don’t understand these things? We (my followers and I) have seen this new kingdom and we’re bearing witness to it, but all you Jewish leaders don’t get it. If you’re stumbling on these earthly things, how can you grasp the deeper realities of heaven? In fact, Nicodemus, I’m the only one who can really make the claim to have come from heaven, but you and all your cronies still don’t get it.” Then Jesus turns back to the Old Testament and uses an example that should help Nicodemus get it.

“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him” (verses 14–15).

Jesus goes back to an event that’s recorded in Numbers 20. The people of God are in the wilderness. They disobey, and fiery serpents come into their midst. They beg Moses to pray to God for help. God tells Moses to take a bronze serpent and put it up on a pole. Whoever looks up at the serpent will live. That’s what happens. Those who looked up to the bronze serpent lived. This is why the symbol of healing today is a serpent around a pole.

Jesus is essentially saying to Nicodemus, “Listen, you have a problem. You’re snake bit. You’re going to die.” That’s a way of saying you’re in a terrible predicament and you need help. You can’t fix yourself. But then Jesus says that like that bronze serpent he himself will be lifted up. He’s talking about something to happen yet in the future. That word “lifted up” is used elsewhere in John to speak of the cross. He referring to the cross. He’s saying whoever looks up at the uplifted Christ, whoever looks in faith to him on the cross, will be born from above.

The new birth is a work of God’s Spirit, but do we have any role in this birthing? No and yes. In one sense, we don’t have a role. We can’t make it happen for ourselves or for anybody else. The

wind blows where it will. But in another sense, we do have a role. We can recognize our predicament. We can confess that we’re snake bit and we’ll die without help from the outside. We can look to Jesus as the only one who can save us. We can look up at the uplifted Jesus and recognize that on the cross he took all the venom of sin into his body so we could be saved.

The “Why” of Salvation

Now, finally, we get to verse 16. We’ve seen the “what” of salvation and the “how” of salvation. What about the “why?” Why would God send help to a bunch of snake-bit people? Especially when you consider that our predicament came as a result of God’s judgment! How could the One who judges also be the One who saves? Here’s why.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (v. 16).

We don’t know for sure who said that. Some say the words of Jesus stop in verse 15 and the words of John begin in verse 16. We don’t know, but it doesn’t really matter. These are perhaps the most important words in the Bible. If you don’t know anything about the Bible, start here. If you know everything about the Bible, return here. What both Jesus and John want us to know is where it all starts. It doesn’t start with you. It doesn’t start you being good. It doesn’t start with you trying to become a better person. Salvation starts with the love of God.

What is God like? The Bible says three things God is in his very essence: God is spirit, which means he’s not contained in a body like we are. God is light, which means he’s righteous, holy and good. Best of all, God is love. Here we see out of that love he gave his Son. Love is always proved by its actions and the action which love always invokes is that of giving. You really can’t separate love from the act of giving. The two always go together. Of course, the greatest love always invokes the greatest sacrifice. I have a son. He’s my only son. I love my son. What could possibly motivate me to give him over to death? Only love.

You might wonder why he loves you. The answer to that isn’t found in you; it’s found in God. He loves you because it’s in his nature to love. He loves you just because... Make no mistake, though, he loves **you**. Max Lucado wrote, “There are many reasons God saves you: to bring glory to himself, to appease his justice, to demonstrate his sovereignty. But one of the sweetest reasons God saved you is because he’s fond of you. He likes having you around. He thinks you’re the best thing to come down the pike in quite a while. If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If he had a wallet, your photo would be in it. He sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning. Whenever you want to talk, he’ll listen. He can live anywhere in the universe, and he chose your heart... Face it, friend. He’s crazy about you!”

Yesterday at the Men's Retreat one of our brothers from the North Campus, Fred Gutierrez, shared his Faith Story. He shared mostly about his son, David. He shared about how his son was a gifted athlete, and how they discovered he had cancer when he was 13 years old, and how he dealt with it over the next three years. He shared some very intimate details about things David said just before the Lord brought him home. I felt like I was in the Holy of Holies. But most of all what I felt was the love of a father for his son. Fred cried and I think just about every man in that room cried because we understand that kind of love.

But consider the fact that that's just a faint reflection of the love of God. Not only did he watch his Son die, he gave his Son to us for this very purpose. How great is his love? Years ago, some words were found scribbled on the wall of an insane asylum next to the bed of a man who had apparently found the love of God before he died. These words were later included in a famous hymn:

Could we with ink the ocean fill
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were ev'ry stalk on earth a quill
And every man a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry,
Nor could the scroll contain the whole
Though stretched from sky to sky.

The "Who" of Salvation

Finally we come to the "who" of salvation. Notice who it is that God loved. It says, ***"For God so loved the world."*** In the gospel of John, "the world" always refers to humanity in rebellion against God. It's not a pretty world or a nice world. So I'd expect an angry God who punishes the world or forsakes the world. But God loves the world with all its injustice and filth and prideful independence. But that doesn't mean the whole world will be saved. He's very clear that while the gift is offered to the whole world, it's only those who believe who receive the benefits of the gift. Nevertheless, those words "whosoever believes" are an open invitation. Anyone can say yes to that invitation.

John Newton was an African slave trader who wrote the song *Amazing Grace*. He once said, "If I read 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that when John Newton believed he should have eternal life,' I should say, perhaps there is some other John Newton; but 'whosoever' means this John Newton and the other John Newton, and everybody else, whatever his name may be." You see, "Whoever" is a universal word.

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the

name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God (verses 17–21).

How we respond to the light determines whether we're condemned or saved. Let me ask you, how do you respond to the light? Do you run away? Do you hide? Will you allow the light to shine on you, or will you choose to stay in darkness? Will you come into the light and allow him to expose your deeds? That's not easy. That requires ruthless and painful honesty. You have to stop hiding. You have to stop denying. You have to stop running. You have to stop fighting.

In our own lives we sometimes try to get rid the "venom" our own way. The Israelites could have vowed to be more careful the next time, but there was no next time. Or they could have organized to fight the deadly serpents. They could have started a non-profit called The Society for the Extermination of Fiery Serpents. They could have even somehow tried to make peace with the serpents or even to try to train them to be nice snakes. But none of these things would have worked. Nicodemus asks, "How can this be? How can I be born again?" We have to abandon all our human strategies to make this happen. It happens only as the wind of God's Spirit brings new life and you look up in faith to the Son of Man on the cross. Back in chapter one John put it this way, ***"Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."***

Would you bow your heads with me? Perhaps you have been experiencing the wind of God's Spirit at work in your life and you're ready to receive him into your heart. If that's true, pray this prayer in your heart with me: *Dear God in heaven, I acknowledge that I'm a sinner, and I'm sorry for my sins and the life that I've lived; I need your forgiveness. I believe that your only Son Jesus Christ shed His blood on the cross and died for my sins, and I'm now willing to turn from my sin. Your Word says if we confess that Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts that God raised Jesus from the dead, we shall be saved. Right now I confess Jesus as my Lord. I believe God raised him from the dead. I accept Jesus Christ as my Savior and surrender to him as my Lord. Thank you Jesus for your unlimited grace which has saved me from my sins. Please transform my life so that I may bring glory to you alone. I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.*

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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Catalog No. 1384–5

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, February 24, 2013 at Central Peninsula Church

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