

Satisfied in a liberating God

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[0 : 00] Welcome to our Wednesday lunchtime service. I hope you feel very welcome and it's really lovely to see so many friendly faces. This morning we're going to be studying John chapter 3 verses 1 to 21.

And as you're turning that up in your Bibles, let me pray for us. Father God, we thank you for the wonderful privilege it is to have your word in our hands.

Thank you that you're a God who has revealed yourself to us and a God who's revealed to us what is required of us to be with you forever.

And we pray this morning that as we look at your word, that it become even more clear to us. We pray, Father, that you'd encourage us, you'd rebuke us, and you'd be transforming us more into the image of your Son.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. So John chapter 3, starting from verse 1. Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

[1 : 17] This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.

Jesus answered him, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus said to him, How can a man be born when he's old?

Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Jesus answered, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born again. For the wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus said to him, How can these things be?

Jesus answered him, Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

[2 : 34] Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 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.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. 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.

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. And this is the judgment.

The light has come into the world and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. But everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.

[3 : 54] But whoever does what is true comes to the light so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God. It's 1942, and you're a highly decorated soldier who has been imprisoned in enemy territory.

You're entrenched in a world of absolute darkness and all hope of escape has long gone. You've tried to escape many times, and despite being the most able soldier in your regiment, you have come nowhere near to success.

Despite your qualifications, you have landed yourself in high security. You're shackled and chained and unable to save yourself.

There you meet two men. One, a fellow prisoner. You've seen him before. He tells you rumors that he has heard.

He tells you weaknesses that he has heard about in the outer wall and changes in the guard's rota, and he encourages you to investigate these rumors for yourself and hopefully claim freedom for yourself too, against all the odds.

[5 : 10] The other man you have not seen before. His face is new to you, and he doesn't look emaciated and malnourished like all the other prisoners.

Whereas everybody else is in misery and despair, he looks quietly confident and assured. He's dressed in prisoners' clothes, but as you question him, you realize that he's actually a free man. So who is he? Well, he's part of a rescue party. He has come from the outside to inform the prisoners on the inside how to gain freedom.

He says that a rescue mission will be launched in two days' time, but you must trust him completely and follow him if you're to gain your freedom.

Which man are you going to listen to? Your fellow prisoner, who is trapped and shackled just like you, or the free man who's come from the outside, who surely knows the way to freedom?

[6 : 15] Well, that is the exact kind of question that I think Jesus is encounter when Nicodemus raises. Nicodemus, like you in the analogy, is a highly decorated individual and is a very, very respectable person.

Verse 1 tells us that he is a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews, and verse 9 tells us that he is the teacher of Israel. He is the theologian in residence, the one who is supposed to understand God the most and teach the other Pharisees about him.

But yet he is somewhat confused when he comes face to face with Jesus. Verse 2 tells us that he recognizes something different in Jesus than what he has seen before.

He says, Rabbi, we know you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him. He's saying, I can't deny what I've seen with my eyes.

God must be behind what you are doing, but I don't know what to make of you yet. Nicodemus is a seeker. And some of us here today might be in a similar position.

[7 : 31] We recognize something different and perhaps even attractive about the person of Jesus. He somewhat resonates with us deep down, even though we don't know what to make of him.

Well, friend, if that is you, then please do stay tuned. Listen to what Jesus has to say and humbly inquire and find out more about him, just like Nicodemus did.

Notice that Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the middle of the night. Now, why on earth would he do that? It's not the best time to go knocking on people's doors, is it, for a chat?

Well, I think John is telling us this detail to show us two things. Firstly, that Nicodemus was a genuine inquirer. He was humbly coming to Jesus to find out more.

He went to all lengths to make up his mind as to who Jesus was. He couldn't have been seen with Jesus during the day or else the other teachers of the law would have disowned him.

[8 : 33] So this decorated and impressive man sneaks through the night to find out more about this man he's just been hearing so much about. But John is also hinting to us that Nicodemus is spiritually in the dark too.

Despite his pedigree and his performance, he is absolutely in the dark and needing enlightened. He might look like he has it all sorted. He's very respectable. But in reality, he is shackled and in the dark just like everyone else.

And are we not the same? We think ourselves enlightened and progressive. We look back on past generations thinking that they were ill-informed and in the shadows.

But have we really come all that far? Despite our best efforts in technology and science and healthcare, we are little better off than the generations before us.

We may not have had a world war in a while, but social and relational problems are on the rise. We can fit the technology of a supercomputer from the 1990s in an iPhone, but we cannot change the human heart.

[9 : 48] We can put on a good show, we can plaster over the cracks, but when we are honest, honest with ourselves, we recognize that we are not as we appear on the surface.

Intelligent, fun, respectable, polite, on the outside, but deeply troubled and selfish within. We are very like Nicodemus, respectable on the surface, hiding rottenness underneath.

But we delude ourselves and we tell ourselves that it isn't so. We tell ourselves that we are actually not all that bad. We love to linger in the shadows rather than come to the light.

We keep ourselves in the dark. So what are we and Nicodemus in the dark about? Well, Nicodemus was in the dark about how to enter the kingdom of God.

Look at verse 3. He has no idea that something radical is needed in order for him to enter God's kingdom.

[10:53] So this is our first point for today. You must be radically changed looking at verses 1 to 8. I think it's fair to say that Nicodemus probably presumed that his moral performance would ensure that he would be welcomed into God's kingdom with open arms.

But Jesus says, no, it takes something far more radical than that to be with God forever. Something as radical as being born again.

And we can sympathize somewhat with Nicodemus, can't we, for being a bit confused. I mean, what does it actually mean to be born again? How can someone my age possibly and size possibly hope of entering my mother's womb for another time have been delivered into the world again? It's very confusing. But this wasn't what Jesus was saying and actually Nicodemus should have known a lot better.

The Old Testament looked forward to the day when God would send his spirit to cleanse God's people and give them new life. The prophet Ezekiel talked of the day when God would sprinkle us clean with water and clean us from all our uncleanness.

[12:13] God would give us a new heart and put a new spirit within us. And that is what Jesus means when he says that Nicodemus must be born of water and of the spirit to enter the kingdom.

He needs God to do something radical to him. He needs God to wash him clean and change him by giving him the Holy Spirit. He can't scrub himself up and expect to make it in the end. And we're exactly the same.

We can't gain eternal life for ourselves. Our best human efforts are undermined by the rot underneath. All our best efforts no matter how well intended just simply can't pull us up to heaven. We need God to bring heaven down to us. And that is why God sends the Holy Spirit to us to wash us and clean us and make us fit for heaven.

This work of the spirit is an incredible work. It's actually incredibly staggering work but it isn't all that obvious is it?

[13:22] We might be tempted to discredit Jesus' words here because we can't see this work going on with our own eyes. And that is why Jesus then moves on and says it is a bit like the wind.

He uses a wind analogy in verse 8 because he says you can't see the wind neither can you see where it comes from but you can see some of the effects of the wind.

Wind in of itself is invisible as is the Holy Spirit but when the wind blows you can see the leaves shake and you can see your washing become dry. So it is with this radical change that comes through the Holy Spirit.

you can't see the Spirit changing you and washing you clean and washing away your past but you will eventually start to see the effects in your life.

You might be sceptical at first but in time you will see a real change in someone who has been given the Holy Spirit. And that is important to note.

[14:24] One of my friends recently became a Christian. Jesus would say that he has been radically changed, liberated from a prison of darkness and given freedom and new life.

But it isn't obvious to the onlooker. He doesn't look hugely different now. He is still a bit proud and a bit arrogant, much the same as he was a couple of months ago.

But over time he will look entirely different. And in contrast to him I have another friend of mine who became a Christian about seven years ago now at the very end of his time at secondary school. Before he knew Jesus his life was a bit of a train wreck. He was a very angry man with a big chip on his shoulder. And to be honest he may be radically changed but he is still a bit rough around the edges now.

But a couple of years ago he decided to go back to his secondary school. and meet his teachers. And his old teachers just simply could not recognize him.

[15:35] They were in absolute disbelief that this was the same man who used to disrupt all their classes. He looked exactly the same physically but had to be changed radically over time.

It wasn't obvious that he had been radically changed when he first put his trust in Jesus. I mean there were no fireworks. But his teachers couldn't deny that he had been radically changed when he met them a few years later.

Well, how can we trust that all these words that Jesus says are true? How do we know that we can trust Jesus' words here about how to be radically changed and how to attain a new life?

plenty of other voices in the world and throughout history have promised similar things, haven't they? A fresh start, a new life, a deeper sense of meaning.

Why should we trust Jesus? That brings us on to our second point. You must listen to Jesus and Jesus alone. One of my other friends is, this is all my friends in one sermon, one of my other friends is a doctor, dietitian slash personal trainer.

[16:52] She has many strings to her bow and she tells me that the key to her life is just by setting goals, loving herself and then she'll be happy. She had been desperately depressed in the past, struggled with anxiety, but a few years ago took up going to the gym, started feeling her self-worth, got the endorphin hit and now feels like a new woman.

living life to the full. She feels that her new philosophy has radically changed her life. So why shouldn't we trust her instead of Jesus?

I mean, I can see the results with my own eyes. I can see how her life has been radically changed. She looks very successful. Well, my friend may be happy and very content, but the truth is she is no better off now and in eternal sense than she was back in her days of depression.

Yes, she feels much better and her day-to-day experience is in many ways idyllic, but she is still just that decorated soldier locked up in the dark that we looked at right at the beginning.

She's masking the reality with fantasy and one day that bubble is going to burst. the new life Jesus says that we need is not just a better version of what we have now.

[18:18] One day my friend will resemble a prune more than a bodybuilder and she'll be staring death straight down the barrel. How will her positive attitude and good work ethic help her then?

Jesus is not just offering us a better quality of life now, but rather an eternal life, life that continues after death, life to the full forever more.

My friend's approach to life now has been effective, but it will come undone in the end, because we can't liberate ourselves from the darkness.

We are chained by the wrong that we have done, and we are culpable, cut off from true freedom and true life and a need of someone from the outside to come inside and rescue us.

You see, the picture I gave you at the start, that picture of a soldier, was somewhat ambiguous on purpose. You probably placed yourself in the shoes of an allied soldier being held in a prison over a war camp behind enemy lines.

[19:32] A terrible tragedy that was unjust and unwarranted. But the reality is that we're not unfortunate, collateral in life. But enemies are the one who fights for truth and justice.

You are not the hero in the story. You are not the knight in shining armor. You are the rebel. That is what the Bible tells us. We might put on a good show and deceive others, and sometimes ourselves too.

But the Bible paints us warts and all, as we truly are. Not just nice people who make occasional mistakes, but people who are turned in on ourselves, desperately selfish by nature, and trying to chart our own ways through life and pretending that we're free.

The Bible says we naturally want nothing to do with God. By nature we want to defame him and besmirch him at every opportunity. And as a result, we are in a terrible position.

We have picked a fight with the God of the universe, and that is a fight that we just simply will not win. Judgment is coming, and if you continue on the trajectory you are on, well, you are facing hell at the end of your days.

[20:49] It's a hard truth, but it is the truth. My friend who is loving life now will one day become undone. Her philosophy will be found out.

And as will Buddha and Muhammad and every other philosophy this world has to offer, because they are just the thoughts of mere humans who are no different to us. The ideas of human beings who have no idea what lies beyond this earth.

So why should we listen to Jesus? Well, verse 13. No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

Jesus is the only authority that we can trust because he has full access to heaven. He is from there. How do we know what is needed for us to have a life and not face God's judgment? Well, we need to listen to Jesus, who is God himself, come to earth to tell us of his rescue plan. Listen to the one from heaven, from outside. Surely he is the only one who can guide us out of this prison to freedom and new life.

[22 : 05] Nobody else in the world has that kind of authority except Jesus. And he urges us to listen to him and him alone, for he is the only one who can liberate us from the dark.

And Jesus reiterates this to Nicodemus. By giving him a history lesson, he goes back to the Old Testament to help him understand what his mission is.

Back in the book of Numbers, in the days of Moses, the Israelites had been unfaithful to God and had rebelled against him. And as a punishment, God brought venomous snakes into the camp and they were let loose.

countless Israelites were bitten. Death was impending for most of them. But God provided a way out. He provided a rescue. All the Israelites had to do was to look up at a bronze serpent on a pole. Just looking at Elro and trusting in that would mean that they were healed from their critical state. Jesus says it's the exact same thing with him.

[23 : 16] One day he would be lifted up, lifted up on a cross, not on a pole. And those who looked to him, believed in him, trusted in him alone and nothing else, would be given eternal life.

They'd be healed from their critical state. That is why Jesus has broken into the world. So they'll tell us this incredible rescue plan. Jesus says that the only way that you can have a radical new life and one that doesn't end in judgment and hell is to believe in him alone, trust in his death, and have God change you by his spirit.

Eternal life can come no other way, only through Jesus. No human being or philosophy can have the same authority as him.

And that brings us on to our last point. You must make an important decision. Verses 16 to 21.

With all this in mind, you have to decide whether you're going to listen to Jesus or not. He's claiming here to be the only authority on life and death.

[24 : 31] And if he is who he says he is, God come to man to save us from condemnation, then it really matters whether we believe in him or not. And this last section from verses 16 to 21 shows us what is at stake and God's desire for us to trust in his son and attain this radical new eternal life for ourselves.

John here sets up a dichotomy. On the one hand, as all those who believe in Jesus will not perish but have eternal life. And on the other side, all those who don't believe in him, verse 18, will stand condemned.

God has no desire for us to be condemned to judgment and hell. That is why he sent Jesus to die on a cross for us. In love, he sent him to take the punishment that we deserve, that we might not be dragged down to hell by our sin and rebellion.

God sent Jesus to take the punishment for us by dying on the cross. If we thank him and trust him, we live. But if we don't say sorry to God for all the evil we have done, if we don't acknowledge Jesus as the only authority and trust in him alone, then we face condemnation.

You see, Jesus' entrance into our broken world is a wonderful, wonderful thing. It is a great act of love and rescue. It's a chance for liberation from a prison of darkness, a chance for a radical new life.

[26 : 12] But it also drives a wedge, a great divide between people and ups the stakes. Jesus' entrance into the world forces us to choose which side we're going to be on.

Who are we going to listen to? Will we trust that he is the only one who has authority to speak on matters of life and death, or will we pay no attention to him at all?

And the tempting thing to do will be to do the latter, because to listen to Jesus means that we see ourselves as we truly are and not as we want to see ourselves. Not the hero, but the criminal.

Not just a decent person making our way through life, but a rebel. And none of us enjoys seeing ourselves like that. Jesus is like a torch shining in a dark room and exposing all the true ugliness and rot that there is in there.

Some of us won't like that exposure, so we'll dismiss it altogether and we'll sculpt back into the shadows, fall back into the darkness where we can continue to delude ourselves that we are good people.

[27 : 22] But some of us will come to the light. Some of us will humbly come to him and admit that we are not as we should be and desperately in need of radical change.

So what will you do? Will you remain shackled in the dark, facing death? Or will you accept the rescue and receive life? But you might say, is this really possible?

Well, it was possible for Nicodemus. This moral man would eventually learn not to trust in his own efforts. One day he would no longer be found skulking around in the shadows, but rather standing with Jesus in the light of day.

We come across Nicodemus again in John's Gospel in chapter 19. Here we find him ensuring that Jesus' body has a proper burial after his crucifixion.

Now something radical must have happened to Nicodemus for him to stand with Jesus at this point in history, to trust him when Jesus looked nothing like a rescuer from heaven, nothing like the authority to listen to.

[28 : 38] Nicodemus did come to trust Jesus in time. He received that eternal life that had been so elusive to him throughout all his morals, not through his performance, but by trusting in a dead man.

He made his mind up about who he thought Jesus was and he stuck with his guns, and three days later he would have been found laughing as Jesus rose from the dead, further showing that he is the only one who is worth listening to about matters of life and death.

So, what about you? Are you going to continue to trust in your own philosophies or your moral performance, hoping that will be all right in the end?

Or will you trust in Jesus, allow him to erase your evil, rescue you from your prison of darkness, and bring you to eternal life? The stakes are only getting higher, and Jesus has forced you to make a decision.

So, what will you do? Well, for many of us today, we'll have made that decision. We'll have made the decision to follow Jesus, won't we? But if that is us, let us continue to be honest with ourselves, and be honest and say that we're not as we should be.

[29 : 56] And of all we say that we follow Jesus with our mouths, we often end up following him, following other philosophies with our feet. We find it very easy, don't we, to turn back to being Nicodemuses.

So, let's endeavor to remember the great rescue, that great liberation that we've experienced, that we might solely depend on Jesus for eternal life, and not on our best efforts.

Also, let's not paint ourselves to be better than we truly are to our family and our friends. We are not squeaky, clean individuals who are worthy of God's grace, which is often what we depict them, but rather rebels who have been pardoned.

We were God's enemy shackled in the dark, and it's only by God's staggering grace that we have been liberated. The one we offended came from outside to liberate us from the prison.

And to spare us punishment. Surely, our friends and family will be more attracted to that message. A message about a liberating God who radically changes broken people like us, rather than a message that you can become to church and become a respectable human being.

[31 : 17] let me pray for us. Father God, we admit that we find it far too easy to relate to Nicodemus.

We are people who like to be seen on the surface to be respectable and good, and we are people who like to trust in our own performance, thinking that we have something to add to what you've done for us.

Father, please crush those ideas in us today. show us the great liberation that you've done for us, what Christ has achieved on the cross.

Show us that we give nothing towards our eternal life, and remind us, in this confusing world where different voices undermine Christ and his authority, remind us that he is the only one who can be trusted.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.