

John 3

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[0 : 0 0] The Christian message can be helpfully and adequately summarized in one word, gospel, or two words if you prefer, good news, because that's what gospel means.

And what we find continually through the pages of Scripture is a message of hope and a message of comfort, a message of joy and a message of peace, that in this context in which we find ourselves, where we are continually reminded of darkness or death or evil or sin, the Bible continually points us to the one who alone can bring good news, great joy for all people.

One of the early translators of the English Bible, William Tyndall, put it this way. He said the evangelion, the Greek word, what we call the gospel, is a Greek word signifying good, merry, glad, and joyful news that makes a man's heart glad and makes him sing, dance, and leap for joy.

So if we understand the Bible aright, if we understand the gospel aright, if we understand Jesus aright, it should prompt within us a response. Not a sad response, but a happy response.

Not a doer or a dull response, but a response that's characterized by joy and by happiness. John Calvin, who is sometimes categorized as quite somber and quite severe, he wrote a short preface to the New Testament in which he said this.

[1 : 3 3] He said, without the gospel, everything is useless and vain. Without the gospel, we are not Christians. Without the gospel, all riches are poverty. All wisdom folly before God.

Strength is weakness. And all the justice of man is under the condemnation of God. But by the knowledge of the gospel, we are made children of God, brothers of Jesus Christ, fellow townsmen with the saints, citizens of the kingdom of heaven, heirs of God with Jesus Christ, by whom the poor are made rich, the weak, strong, the fools, wise, the sinner, justified, the desolate, comforted, and the doubting, sure, and slaves, free.

And that's why Tyndall said, it's such good news that it should make our heart glad and make us sing and dance and leap for joy. So if the Christian message can be summarized in this simple word, or two words, gospel good news, why is it that there are so many counterfeit messages?

Why are there so many efforts made to qualify, or to change, or to transform this message, or to substitute? Now, I have to admit, I'm a bad person for doing this.

When I'm at a restaurant, my wife always says to me, Bob, just order something from the menu. Well, sometimes I look at, and I like this dish, I like the meat in that dish, and I like the potatoes in that dish, and I might like the sauce from that dish.

[3 : 0 4] And I'll say, well, could you put those different things together? That's my, that's just the way, maybe I'm an American, I do that kind of thing. Maybe you guys will just order from the menu. But that's fine at a restaurant.

It's fatal when we come to the gospel. Because what we have in John chapter 3, and we'll find later in one of Paul's letters, is this. Is there's a constant temptation and tendency on our part to substitute something for this good news of great joy.

To somehow qualify, to somehow shade, or to somehow substitute something for the good news concerning Jesus Christ. And we have Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was a religious figure. He was a Pharisee. He was a leader. So he had authority, but he also had religious status. Something's missing, of course, because here this man comes to Jesus at night.

You see, you don't come in the middle of the night to a new teacher or a new rabbi if you have all the answers. And in fact, when Nicodemus begins to speak, he flatters Jesus.

[4 : 15] And some of the English translations capture this, but others don't. In verse 3, in the version I have here, it says Jesus replied. It literally says, Jesus answered.

And you'll notice that Nicodemus wasn't asking a question. But Nicodemus had questions. And maybe this morning you have questions. And maybe you're here not because of what you know, but maybe you're here because of what you don't know.

Maybe you're here not because of what you believe, but maybe because of what you don't yet believe. And if you're here in that condition or that category, I'm really delighted you're here because this message this morning will tell you what Jesus has to say about you and what Jesus has to say to you.

So Nicodemus, the religious man, comes to Jesus with unanswered questions. And Jesus answers his question, but answers his question in a way that he could never anticipate.

Because he says, Nicodemus, I tell you, verily, verily, or amen, or amen, Jesus always tells the truth. There are certain principles that we need to understand about the Bible that help us make sense of what God is saying.

[5 : 27] That God always tells the truth. He's a truth-telling God. So if we are followers of God and followers of Jesus, that's why we tell the truth. We don't lie.

We tell the truth. We don't shade the meaning. We just say it as it is. Jesus says, I tell you the truth. No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.

And if Nicodemus didn't get it the first time, he says in verse 7, you must be born again. Now, I said a moment ago that the message of the gospel is summarized in one word gospel or two words good news.

Now, Jesus seems to be giving us two different words. He says that the key to the gospel is born again. And this is quite remarkable.

Because Nicodemus, by his appearance, would seem to have it all. Status, identification, religious knowledge, respectability.

[6 : 23] And interest. He's got an interest in Jesus. He comes to Jesus with questions. He comes to Jesus for answers. So you would say, you know, if we were evaluating, that here's somebody who's got it together.

And actually, Jesus says, he doesn't say that you've got most of it or almost all of it. Jesus says you haven't even made the first start. Because it's not what you have done for God, Nicodemus.

It's not what you or I have done for God. But the key here is what God must do for us. So you see, you add all of human religion and all of human effort.

You put it all together. And Jesus said that is inadequate. You must be born again. One of the great figures in the history of the church was a man called John Wesley.

If you ever go to the Free Church in London, the Free Church in London is right next to the Museum of London, right in the city of London. But there's a plaque just outside of the building in which the Free Church meets just off Aldersgate Street.

[7 : 25] And the plaque tells us that on this site, on the 24th of May, 1738, John Wesley's heart was strangely warmed. You see, John Wesley was a man who had religion.

He would read the Bible. He would study the Bible with his friends. He would pray together. They would serve. They would visit hospitals. They would visit prisons. He went on mission tours of the American colonies as they were.

And you would look at John Wesley and you would say, John Wesley must be a Christian. He's doing all the things that you would expect a Christian to do. He's doing all the religious things you would expect a believer in Jesus to do.

But Wesley realized that while he was telling others about Jesus, that he himself was unconverted. And he tells us in his journal, he said that one, that he went unwillingly to a society on Aldersgate Street.

And at that meeting, someone was reading Luther's preface to the epistle to the Romans. And about a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed.

[8 : 31] I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation. And an assurance was given me that he was taking away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

Religion wasn't enough. Praying wasn't enough. Studying the Bible wasn't enough. Going to church wasn't enough. Doing Christian things wasn't enough. John Wesley realized that he needed a change of heart that he himself could not do.

Nicodemus, religion. So, it's not satisfactory. So, our first point here is the message of Christianity is not what you do for God.

But the message of Christianity is what God and God alone must do for you. So, we can't, but he can. We can't add. We can't subtract.

We can't contribute. This work relies wholly upon God himself. Now, we can understand that Nicodemus is a bit perplexed. Because he says, he hears the words of Jesus, you must be born again.

[9 : 36] Now, there's, you know, if you've studied languages, sometimes it's hard to equate one language with another. Or one word with another. Because in English, this word again, we understand again.

You do something and you do it again. Again, I'm going to preach at 11 o'clock and I'm going to preach again at 6 o'clock. Now, that doesn't mean I'm going to preach the same sermon. Nor will I be preaching to the same congregation.

But I'll be doing this particular activity at seven hours hence. But in Greek, there's two ways of saying again. There's just that idea of repetition. You do something and you do it again.

But there's another word that's used that says you do something or something is done by the same person who did it the first time. So, Jesus is saying, Nicodemus, you must be born again.

And the one who gives you new birth is the one that gave you birth in the first place. And that's why Nicodemus begins to think of his mother. Because he said, I know how I was born to begin with, mom.

[10 : 36] And I'm an adult now. Jesus, you're telling me to be born again by the one who gave me birth to begin with. That's impossible. Well, Jesus was actually saying to Nicodemus, we're not going back to your mother.

We're actually going back to the beginning. And we go back to the beginning and we ask the question, who gives life to people? Who gave life to the first people, Adam and Eve? God breathed into them and they became living spirits.

God gave the breath of life so birth comes from God. So new birth or born again must come from that same source. So what is Jesus saying?

Human effort is insufficient. The combined effort of all in this room is not adequate. However hard you try, however many church services you attend, however many chapters of the Bible you might read is not enough.

John Wesley recognized that he couldn't do it. Martin Luther couldn't do it. Nicodemus couldn't do it. But the good news is God can and God does. And he continually does the impossible.

[11 : 42] So human religion, Nicodemus, is not adequate. Your effort, your commitment, your works do not add up to the sum that is required.

So you might say, well that's bad news. Well I think sometimes we need to realize what isn't going to work so that we realize what will only work. So Nicodemus is told you must be born again.

Now our friend John Wesley, 1738, he had 50 more years and he preached over 40,000 sermons. That's 800 sermons a year for 50 years.

Average of almost three sermons a day. And it's estimated that John Wesley preached of those sermons maybe 8,000 sermons on his favorite text, John 3, 7.

You must be born again. And he summarized his understanding of the Christian faith in this way. He says, if any doctrines within the whole compass of Christianity may be properly termed fundamental, they are doubtless these two.

[12 : 48] The doctrine of justification and the doctrine of the new birth. The former relating to that great work which God does for us in forgiving our sins. And the latter to the great work which God does in us in renewing our fallen nature.

But notice what Wesley doesn't say. He doesn't say, and the work that we do for God. No. Because the message is this. Jesus Christ died on the cross for us.

The Holy Spirit brings life within us. That's the key to our faith. And you notice that we are the recipients. We are the beneficiaries.

We are not the contributors. We are not the partners. We are not working with Jesus. And nor are we working with the Holy Spirit. But we are wholly dependent upon God to do this work.

So Jesus, first of all, corrects Nicodemus' misunderstanding. And then he states specifically what the new birth looks like.

[13 : 48] And where this new birth comes from. Because he then goes on to tell Nicodemus about the wind. Interesting. Today, we've been told that we have a yellow warning from the Met Office that we have high winds throughout the United Kingdom.

Not surprising for Scotland in the middle of winter. But you know it's a windy day. You feel it in your face. Or if you're inside, you look out and you see the trees moving around. And Jesus says that's exactly how you know the Spirit.

You know the Spirit is at work by what you see. So Jesus says you must be born again, Nicodemus. Human effort is insufficient. And then he goes on to tell them a lesson about the Old Testament.

A lesson which Nicodemus would have known. Moses and the serpent in Numbers. You could look it up. The people were complaining. God sent a serpent. Serpents, they bit the people.

They were dying. They cry out to Moses. God commands Moses, put a serpent on a stake, on a pole. The people look at the serpent, they'll live.

[14 : 51] If they don't look, they'll die. And Jesus says, just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up. It's not what you do for God, Nicodemus.

It's what God does for you. And it's what God must do for you, and only God can do for you. So if you're here this morning with an interest in finding out more about Christianity, I've got bad news.

The bad news is there's nothing you can do. But the good news, the great news that will make you leap and dance and shout for joy, is that God has done all that is required.

Because he has done the work. He has paid the price. He has done this for us, and he will do this in us. And in verse 16, we're told, for God so loved the world.

The world that didn't recognize Jesus when he came. The world that didn't welcome him. The world that was categorized by sin. And the world that ultimately rejected Jesus. This world is the world that God loves.

[15 : 55] And he loves this world to such an extent that he sends his son into this world so that people might have life in him. A friend of mine took a tour of Europe.

You know these Uriel passes. And he went into the great museums of Europe, and he would take photographs of famous works of art. But he had a particular way of doing it. He would go to Paris.

He would go to the Louvre. And he would take a picture of a painting. And I would look at the painting. I said, I've never seen that painting before. What's that? He said, oh, that's the painting right next to the Mona Lisa. He'd go to the British Museum in London.

And he would take a picture of a statue. And I said, what statue is that? He said, well, that's the statue next to the Rosetta Stone. You see, a lot of times when you have a passage like John 3.16, you don't notice what's around it because your attention is fixed on this wonderful passage.

But if you notice what's right next to John 3.16 is John 3.17. And sometimes we don't notice John 3.17 because our attention is on John 3.16. For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world.

[17 : 03] That's what you might expect. The world that didn't recognize Jesus, condemn that world. The world that's categorized by sin, condemn that world. The world that doesn't care, the world that doesn't know, the world that does its own thing.

You would think the message of God is a message of condemnation, but quite the opposite. The message of Jesus is not a condemnation, but the message of Jesus is profoundly a message of salvation.

Now, there is a day coming. The Bible makes it quite clear. There's a day coming when Jesus will return. He will return not as Savior, but he'll return as Judge. But that's his day.

And that's his work. So for you and I as Christians, if we are believers in Jesus, ours is not a message of condemnation. Ours is not a message of judgment.

Judgment is coming. In fact, we're told condemnation is a present reality. It's not a future event only, but it's a present reality that people are condemned already. So what we don't need to do is to add another voice to that condemnation.

[18 : 10] People are condemned already. We need a voice that speaks of salvation. We need a voice that speaks of hope, not despair. A voice that speaks of joy and not sorrow. A voice that speaks of peace and not war.

So if Jesus has come to save, we receive that gift. If Jesus has come to transform and to renew, we say, thank you, Jesus. That's exactly what I need.

And that's exactly what I can't do. But so often, instead of sounding a note of hope, instead of sounding a note of joy, instead of sounding that good news, we might find ourselves strangely adding a voice to the condemnation of this world.

And John 3.17 says the message of Jesus is not a message of condemnation. So in John chapter 3, we're told what the good news isn't.

Human effort. We're told what the good news is. What the Holy Spirit does in us. And what Jesus Christ does for us. We bring nothing to that party.

[19 : 12] We add nothing to that equation. All we do is receive what God has given to us. So what have we learned? We've learned that the Holy Spirit alone can make alive.

We've learned that Jesus and Jesus alone can set us free from condemnation. And that God actually loves this world. But if you'll turn with me for a moment to Galatians.

If you'll turn in the New Testament to Galatians, this is one of Paul's letters. This was one of the most popular, I think the favorite letter of Martin Luther. Martin Luther loved this letter.

And he loved what it said. And I'd like to read the verses, just the verse, verse 20 of chapter 2. Because we're told in John 3 that the Spirit must make us alive.

We're told in John 3 that God loves this world. But then you might wonder, where do we stand with regard to Jesus? Well, John 3 to 2.20 tells us exactly what Jesus has to say about us.

[20 : 16] You see, Paul here, who tried his best to do what God required. And found himself opposing the gospel and opposing Jesus. And then he now testifies this.

He says, I have been crucified with Christ. And I no longer live. But Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body.

I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. One of the great theologians of the 20th century was a man called Karl Barth.

There are certain theologians that you measure their output not in volumes, but in shelves. And if you want to look at the works of Karl Barth, you need several shelves of a very large bookcase to contain them.

And one of his students said, Dr. Barth, tell me what is the most important truth that you have ever learned concerning God. And Karl Barth said, that's easy.

[21 : 16] Jesus loved me. This I know. For the Bible tells me so. All those shelves of theology, he summarized in those words, Jesus loved me.

And how do I know that Jesus loved me? Because the Bible tells me that Jesus loved me. And you might be here today as a Christian. And you might look and you might say, I haven't made much of the Christian life.

I've kind of let myself down. I've kind of let God down. I've let my family down. And I haven't really made much of this Christian life. That may or may not be true. But rather than asking me what you think about you, or me asking you what you think about your Christian life, what you think about your faith in Jesus, I'd like you to consider what Jesus has to say about you.

Because what he has to say about you is much more important than what I might say, or even what you might say about yourself. Because here is a verse that reminds us that Jesus Christ looks upon you in love.

He says it, and he shows it. And what Martin Luther said this, he said, in reading this verse, he said, Who is this me? You know, when Paul says, The life I live, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

[22 : 36] And Martin Luther continued that sentence. He said, I, wretched and damnable sinner, dearly beloved of the Son of God. If I could by work or merit love the Son of God and come to him, why should he have sacrificed himself for me?

For Christ is joy and sweetness to a broken heart. Christ is a lover of poor sinners and such a lover that he gave himself for us. Now, if this is true, and it is true, then we are never justified by our own righteousness.

And Martin says this, he says, Read the words me and for me with great emphasis. Print this me with capital letters in your heart. And do not ever doubt that you belong to the number of those who are meant by this me.

Christ did not only love Peter and Paul. The same love he felt for them, he feels for us. So, you see, the Bible tells us, and the Bible shows us, that the Son of God loved me.

And you might say, well, how do you know that? Well, he gave himself for me. He says it and he shows it. Now, I conduct many weddings, which is a great privilege. And I have before me a couple who love each other.

[23 : 50] It's a wonderful day. Everybody is dressed very nice. We're in a beautiful venue. It's a happy occasion. And what I try to convey to the couple is this. That the promises that you are making to each other are so important.

The words that you say are so important. But the lives that you live will either confirm or contradict those promises. So, words and actions must go together.

Now, as human beings, they never go together perfectly. We say things and we do things. And there's so often a conflict or a contradiction. But with Jesus Christ, there's a perfect harmony between his word and his action.

So that here Paul, who persecuted the church, who oversaw the execution of Stephen, who had letters to arrest Christians, who felt that it was his job to destroy the gospel, he now finds himself strangely preaching the gospel that he once tried to destroy.

And he now says that his identity is not found in what he does. His identity is not found in what he is of himself.

[24 : 59] Remember how he could tell you his pedigree, the tribe and the religious attainment and the training? No, no, no. He says his identity is now found outside of himself.

Because he says, I live. Yes, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. And if you're a Christian here this morning, this verse is a powerful liberation.

Because it frees you from guilt. It frees you from shame. It frees you from that disappointment to say, I feel like I've done so little for God. I feel that I've achieved so little for Jesus.

And all that may be true. But you see, your identity is not found in your work for him, but in his work for you. And the measure of your faith is not how much you love Jesus, but the measure of your standing before God is how much does Jesus love you.

And rather than giving us a license to do what we want, you see, the Apostle Paul could do anything, go anywhere, speak to anyone, face any foe, deal with any hardship because he knew for a certainty that his foundation in life was based upon this love.

[26 : 13] A love that was spoken. A love that was demonstrated. A love that was personal. A love that was powerful. And a love that was transformative. In the early part of the 19th century, the founding father of the Free Church, a man called Thomas Chalmers, like John Wesley, Chalmers was converted in the middle of his ministry.

Chalmers was a preacher, and he had this idea. He preached in a village in Fife, and he was a professor in St. Andrews. And he thought, this is wonderful. I can get a full salary and a place to live for one day's work at the church.

Then I have five days' work at the university. Then all of a sudden, he's converted. And he becomes the most powerful preacher of the gospel of his generation, unexpectedly.

And he, from that point forward, articulates so clearly the message of the gospel. And the most famous sermon that he ever preached was entitled, The Expulsive Power of a New Affection.

Now, if you think of it this way, if a guy here, if let's say you had an old girlfriend, you went out with her for a while, and then you meet the love of your life.

[27 : 28] And you meet this girl, and you just can't get her out of your mind. And you want to get engaged. You want to get married. You want to settle down. And basically what happens is, the memory of the old girlfriend begins to fade if it doesn't disappear already.

Why? Because you've got a new object of your affection. And what Chalmers was saying to his audience, a large audience, was this. He says there are two ways in which a practical moralist, a preacher, can attempt to displace from the human heart its love of the world.

Okay? He says, either by the demonstration of the world's vanity, so that the heart shall be prevailed upon simply to withdraw its affection from an object that is not worthy. You can say, Christian people, here's the world, and this is what it offers.

It doesn't satisfy. It doesn't fulfill. It's not real. It's not lasting. And just pull away from that world. Pull away from that affection. He says, or, by setting forth another object, even God, as more worthy of its attachment, so that as the heart shall be prevailed upon not to resign an old affection, which shall have nothing to succeed it, but to exchange an old affection for a new affection.

Chalmers went on to say, he said, the first way doesn't work, but the second way always works. Because when you present Jesus Christ, you present a new object of affection.

[28 : 50] You say, whatever you have loved before, this object of affection, this object of worship, this object of praise, is infinitely better. And when Jesus comes into your heart, inevitably, he squeezes out other things, other desires, other interests, other loves, because this new affection takes hold of your heart and transforms you from the inside out.

So this morning, if you're not yet a Christian, I can tell you what Jesus has done. I can tell you what Jesus has said. I can tell you what Jesus has promised. But in a sense, I can't tell you what it feels like.

I can't explain what the experience is like until you receive this gift for yourself, until you respond to this Jesus for yourself. And for those of us who have already trusted, let me say to you this, that so often we find ourselves substituting something for Jesus, adding something to him, wanting to do something for him, wanting to somehow contribute to this package.

And there's nothing that we can add, nothing that we can contribute. We are simply the beneficiaries of his grace, his goodness, his love, and his mercy. But above all this morning, if you're a follower of Jesus, and if you feel that you've let him down, if you feel that your love has grown cold, if you feel that, generally, you haven't made much of this Christian life, I want you to take heart from what the Apostle Paul has said here.

That the foundation of your life is the love of Jesus. And he genuinely loves you. He powerfully loves you. He personally loves you. He persuasively loves you.

[30 : 35] And the gospel presents Jesus to the person who is not yet a believer. And says, believe in the Lord Jesus and you'll be saved. But the gospel equally powerfully presents Jesus to the believer.

And says, there is no affection better. There is no object more worthy. And there is none that loves you more. Because when you have a foundation that is built upon him, you can go anywhere.

Do anything. You can serve. You can speak. You can witness. You can be the man or the woman of God. Because you have a firm foundation that is rooted in Jesus.

So this morning, I want you to know that the key is not the strength of your commitment. The key is not the strength of your affection. The key is not the depth of your love.

But if you know who Jesus is, and that you can say with Paul that I have faith, I live by faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me, you have a firm foundation that can never be taken away.

[31 : 38] You have a commitment of God through Jesus that can never be revoked. And that sure foundation will be the foundation for a Christian life that will last. Our Christian testimony that will persevere.

And a faith that will indeed impact this world. Because people will see not us, not what we do for him, but they will come to realize that all that we are and all that we have is Jesus Christ who loved us and who gave himself for us.

Let us pray. Father, we ask that you might impress upon our hearts and minds these great truths. That we need Jesus on the cross.

We need him to be lifted up and raised. And as we come to him in faith, we have now this gift of life eternal. eternal. We thank you for the work of the Holy Spirit. What he can do in us.

How he can take death and bring life. How he can take darkness and bring light. How he can take rebellion and enmity and bring harmony and love.

[32 : 45] We thank you, Lord, that this morning we are standing in the presence of the one who has done all. The one who has provided everything. And the one who says to us to respond in faith.

To accept all the gifts that have been given. And to place ourselves firmly on the one that can never let us go. The one that can never let us down.

The one whose commitment to us is perfect, powerful, and personal. Lord, you know each one of our hearts. You know those who are not yet your own. Lord, speak to them.

Remind them of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. You know those of us who are your own and who find so much within our own hearts and minds that are so imperfect, so inconsistent, so disappointing.

Remind us of that love of Jesus that sees us, accepts us, loves us, and transforms us from the inside out. Remind us of the measure of his love, the measure of his commitment, the measure of his power, the measure of his grace.

[33 : 47] And let us rest firmly and fully upon him because we pray in his name. Amen.