

Series: Unlikely Encounters

**In the Night**

John 3:1-21, Ephesians 2:3-4

Sermon by Lead Pastor Paul Joslin

Waterstone Community Church, Littleton, Colorado

Sunday morning, March 1, 2026

A reading from John 3:1-9: “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.’ Jesus replied, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.’ ‘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,’ and 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 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.’ ‘How can this be?’ Nicodemus asked.” This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

Paul: Thanks so much, Topher. Last week we made a couple of announcements about how we are making some changes to our service times. We are going to two services on Sunday morning, which we are really excited about, and part of that decision is we will not have our Saturday night service anymore, but at the end of the weekend, a few of you came up to me and said, “Hey, Paul, just out of curiosity, are you excited at all about going to two services? We could not quite tell,” and I realized, and I just need you to hear if there’s any hesitation or measure in how I made that announcement last week, it is purely because I know for some of you, Saturday night is a really important space, and I care about you. I feel that. I love Saturday night, and so there was probably a little bit of measure in how I was communicating that, but what I need you to hear today is I am absolutely really excited about moving to two services on Sunday morning. That is our 9:00 and 10:45 services, so if you have not heard about the plan, starting on March 21, that is going to be our last Saturday night service. I heard some rumors this week about some sort of party that maybe involves ice cream, and if I misheard those rumors, now it will happen, because that is what happens when you are the lead pastor and you just manifest those things that you want like that, so I think Brooke is planning a party, and I want ice cream. So, we will do something like that and celebrate, and then the weekend after, it is Palm Sunday, and on Palm Sunday, we are going to do one large church service, 10:00 a.m. in here. Everybody from Saturday night is going to come over. Everyone here, I would encourage you to probably get here a little early. We are going to have the Palm Parade with the kids. There are going to be a lot of people here, and we just want to celebrate Palm Sunday as one whole church, and then Easter we will move to those new service times, and from then on out, we will have 9:00 and 10:45 as our service times.

Now, some people have asked, “Why 9:00 and 10:45?” If you have been around Waterstone long enough, you remember we used to have a 10:30 service, and we just want to give a little more space in between services. We do not want people to feel rushed out of the building. We want people to be able to

interact and have time to hang out in the hub, and they have also talked a little bit about how the pastor preacher guy goes a little long sometimes, so we have to make a little room for that, and if you do not know who that is, I am that pastor, and I am working on that. So really excited, but here, Brooke mentioned this. We want to move into a season where we are asking everyone to come and sit in one and serve in one. What that means is we want you to come, we want you to worship, we want you to engage with church the way you always do, but we are also asking people to not just attend Waterstone. We want to be a church where people do not just attend, but a church where people belong, and so one of the ways we believe you can do that is by serving on a Sunday morning. We want to see you maybe serve coffee to families who are really tired when they get up, and they are trying to drag their kids to church in the morning. Give them a donut so the kids have a smile, or greet someone at the door, so no one ever enters our building and feels like they have not been seen. Serve in our kids' ministry, where we want kids to have an experience at church where they want to come back the next weekend. How amazing would that be if our kids in our kids' ministry were like, "Church is so awesome." You could be a part of that, and so we are asking for you to step in. We are not just trying to fill slots of opportunities for serving. We really want to be a church where you belong and are not just attending, walking in and walking out on a Sunday morning. So that is what we are asking from you as we move into this new season, and yes, I am really excited about it. I am excited about what the Lord is doing here. I feel like it is amazing, even on a morning like today, there are people who are walking in towards the end of worship, and they can't find a seat, and we want to make room for more people to find worship here. So that is what we are going to be asking you to do in the coming weeks. Then, let's pray as we dive into this morning's message.

Heavenly Father, Lord, I ask that as we come and open your word today, Father, we believe that your grace is endless and that your mercy is limitless, and yet sometimes, Lord, that is something we forget, all of us. Whether we've been walking with you for fifty years or maybe we're coming through the doors today, and we're not quite sure what we believe about you, we all have beliefs about you, and Father, I pray today as we dive into this story of Nicodemus, Lord, I just pray that as we open your word, that our hearts would be open to you. Lord, I pray that we would encounter you this morning, that you would speak to our hearts and to our souls in the places that we need most. Lord, we thank you for this time together, and we pray that whatever, maybe distractions or weights that we have been carrying this week, that we are coming in with, I pray, Father, that we would not just forget those things, but that we would lay them at your feet, and that we would offer them to you, and that we would see what you have to say about the things that we have been worried about or that we have been carrying. God, we just give it all to you, and we pray that you would meet us here now in this moment. It is in Christ's name we pray, amen.

All right, so by show of hands, I love HGTV and the DIY shows. Does anybody else out there like HGTV? Okay, there are like twelve of us in the room. There were like five last night at the Saturday night service, so I hope this illustration is going to go okay, because it sounds like, has anybody watched HGTV before? Okay, still more, but less than I would have thought. All right, so we will see how this goes. I love HGTV, and when Stephanie and I were first married, we did not have cable or anything like that. Now we have YouTube TV. We are moving up in the world, everyone, but when we were first married, we did not have any way of watching cable TV or any of that stuff, and so what would happen was we would go on vacation, and if we were at an Airbnb, or if we were at a hotel, we would just have HGTV on in the

background all the time, so like *Fixer Upper*, *Property Brothers*, all of those shows, and we loved it, but here is the thing that I noticed. After the first day or two, it is like, “Wow, that is really cool.” It opens your horizons to the possibilities of what you could do with your home, and you are like, “This is incredible. We could paint this color, or we could remove this wall, or we could do this thing to our house,” and that sounds awesome for the first two days, and then you realize this vacation is winding down. I have just created a massive to-do list that is existing for me when I get back home, and that feels terrible, and you go from this place of resting and relaxing to realizing there is so much work that needs to be done, and all of it lands on me, because all the whole purpose of it is all DIY. Like, you do it yourself. That is literally the whole purpose, and so I realized that watching HGTV on vacation was not the best thing for my soul.

Now, here is why we’re talking about this and why I am bringing up this television network that none of you watch. It is that here is the reality. I think some of that mentality, even if you do not watch HGTV, this idea of projects, of fixing it up, of making it better, of improvement, I think that does not just exist in our homes. I think that that is something that has actually seeped into our souls, and what I mean by that, if you have read anything from John Mark Comer, he is a pastor, and he is someone who said that there exists in our culture this ethos, this belief that we are a project, and he calls it, “project self.” If you have no idea what I am talking about when I say project self, I bet you will understand from the definition. It is essentially this idea that when you look at your life, and you look at your body or your heart or your mind or your career or your family or your relationships or any of those things, you believe that they are inherently a project. There is something that you need to improve. There is something that you need to fix up. There is something that is wrong with those things, and if you can just get the system right, if you can just figure out how to fix yourself in all of those areas, if you can fix up your life, as it were, and do it yourself, then you will find the life that you have always been looking for, and there is this baseline assumption that comes with Project Self. It is this modern habit of treating your identity as something you must constantly construct, curate, or improve, that there is something wrong with you, and if you can just build the life that you feel like will solve that thing, then you will finally be happy. So essentially, the baseline assumption about Project Self is that you need to try harder to become the version of yourself that feels okay to you, or that you even maybe like.

Here is the problem with that idea. The Project Self, just like me on vacation watching DIY, gets to a point where it is actually just exhausting, because there is always more to be done. There is always something else that needs to be fixed. There is actually never a finish line when it comes to this idea of project self. The projects are never done. There is always another upgrade, another metric, another area of your life that needs improvement. The goalpost keeps moving. Have you ever felt that way before? You finally got the job, the career, the relationship, the family, the house, and then suddenly it is like, “Okay, this is what we have been longing for. This is what we have tried to get,” and suddenly it feels like, “Okay, but what about over there? Like, what about what is more?” I mean, it is the famous quote from John D. Rockefeller, who was asked, “How much money is enough?” He was the wealthiest man in the world, and they say, “How much money is enough?” and he says, “Just a little bit more.” The goalpost always shifts.

It is not only exhausting because there is no finish line, and you just have to keep going with the race. It is also exhausting because your worth feels conditional. If you are a project, then your worth and value is tied to how successfully you navigate those projects, and so your value rises and falls with your

success or your failure. It is the whole ethos of Tom Brady, who after winning three Super Bowls, marrying a supermodel, and becoming a millionaire, was asked, “What else is there for you to achieve?” and he said, “I don’t know, but there has got to be more to life than this.” It is that emptiness, that ache, that longing, that exhaustion. There has always got to be something more.

It always leads to comparison, constant comparison between yourself and others. Every other person in your life becomes a benchmark. The social media, the careers, the fitness, even other Christians and their spirituality move to this place where they are either ahead of you in something you need to try to get to, or someone that you are ahead of and can point back at and laugh at, because I am better than you. It is this mentality. I read this week that there was a supermodel, and she was asked about her body image and her belief about her looks, and she said, this is fascinating to me. She said, “I don’t know a single supermodel who does not feel insecure about the way they look.” Think about that for a moment. The people that our culture has lifted up as the most beautiful people in the world, the people that we are all supposed to look at, and they are saying, “all of us feel insecure.” What hope is there for the rest of us? Like that sounds awful, so it is no wonder that if we are living under this identity of project self, this belief that we have to curate and improve and fix ourselves up, is it any wonder why so many of us wander around exhausted and worn out and feeling burned out? Because we are constantly under pressure to optimize or to fix or to make better, and there is never a finish line, and it leads to all of this comparison, and there is always something else that we are supposed to try to get for ourselves.

Which is why I love the story that we step into today, the story of a man named Nicodemus, and I love the way it starts: “Now there was a man named Nicodemus,” and what you need to know about Nicodemus is all told in the very first sections of this chapter. In verses 1 through 3, it says, “Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Jewish ruling council, and he came to Jesus at night.” There are three things right out of the gate that we are supposed to understand about who this person was, and the first one is that he was a Pharisee. He was one of the religious elite. He was essentially someone who had achieved everything there was to achieve spiritually. He had understood the Torah, the law, scriptures. He understood what God wanted for his life. He had done everything that he was supposed to do to have a good, robust, spiritual life, and beyond that, he had not only achieved everything there was to achieve spiritually, but he had also achieved everything there was to achieve socially. He was a part of the Jewish ruling council. Socially, he was at the top of the food chain. He understood, and he was someone that everyone else looked up to and had the life that everyone else longed for, and then third, we are told that he came to Jesus at night. Why did Nicodemus come to Jesus at night?

In the gospel of John, which is the book where we are in this series, Unlikely Encounters, night always stands for confusion or feeling lost. It always stands for this sensation of not knowing where you are going, and so what we are told is essentially this, that this man who had everything that spirituality had to offer and who had everything that socially he could obtain, he still felt like there was something missing in his life. He still felt like there was a gap between the life that he felt like he wanted to have and the life that he actually had. So, he goes to Jesus in the middle of the night, and he essentially says to Him, “Okay, I think you are from God. I see all the signs you are doing. I see the miracles you are performing, so maybe you have the answer to what is going wrong in my soul,” because what Nicodemus essentially shows us in the scary and at the same time relieving element of the story is essentially this, that you can

do all of the correct spiritual things, and you can obtain all of the things that the world has to offer you, and you can still feel like you are dying inside, and there is something not coming to life, and so he goes to Jesus, and he asks this question, “What is missing? What is it that I need to do to find the life that I am looking for? It is still feeling out of reach to me,” and so we have a front row seat today.

If you have ever felt that longing or that gap or that expectation in your soul or your heart or your mind, we have a front row seat today to see what Jesus says to that feeling, to that sense of being lost, to that sense of longing, and this is what Jesus says. In John 3, verse 3, Jesus replied to this question that he comes to Jesus with, and He says, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” Now essentially what is happening so far is Nicodemus comes to Jesus, and he says, “I have tried it all. I have done it all. I have done all of the things that I feel like I am supposed to do, and I still feel empty. What else do I need to do?” That is his question to Jesus; “Where do I need to just try a little harder?” and Jesus says essentially to him, “You do not need to try harder at all. You do not need to try again. You need to be born again.”

This phrase, “born again,” carries a double meaning. In the original languages, it essentially means born again, like it is translated, but it also can mean born from above, and so what Jesus is essentially saying is, “You are coming to me, and you are asking in this moment what you can do to make your life better, and you do not understand. It is nothing that you can do. You actually need to receive something from above,” but Nicodemus hears the word in the first meaning. He hears born again, and so he is probably a literalist, because this is what he says in verse 4: “Well, 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,’ which is a really graphic image, and essentially what he’s saying in this moment is, “Okay, you’re saying I need to be born again. I’m taking that literally. Not that I need to be born from above, but I need to be born again,” and he has just got this question, like, “What does this have to do with my mom? Like, what do I need to ask her to do? Like, this feels a little uncomfortable, Jesus. I am not quite sure what you are getting at,” and Jesus says, “No, you are completely misunderstanding what I’m saying, that it is not from being born again, it is that you need to be born from above, born from God. It is not a physical birth. It is a spiritual rebirth.”

So what Jesus is saying to him in this moment is the life that you are looking for, the kingdom of God, the place where everything has what you are looking for, and not just this health or wealth sense, but in the sense of you are living out your purpose and your meaning, your calling, you are living for God, not for yourself, the only way you can obtain that is by receiving it from God. Not from human effort, not from religious pedigree, not from moral improvement, not from the things that this world has to offer you. That is why he says in the next few verses, in verses 5 through 7, Jesus answers him again, and He says, “It is not about being born again, Nicodemus. That’s gross. That’s weird. Why did you say that?” Then in verse 5, He says this, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at what I am saying to you, you must be born again.”

How many of you look at that, and you do what I often do when I read Jesus words, and I say, “What? Like, what are you talking about, Jesus? Okay, so you are just talking about being born again and that I need to be born again and from up there, not down here, but then you start talking about be born of

water and the Spirit and then flesh gives birth to flesh and Spirit to spirit. What are you talking about?” Does anybody ever come to those moments in the gospels where Jesus is teaching, and you are like, “Okay, I feel like I understood what you said, and then you explained it more, and now I am totally lost. I have no idea what you are talking about.” Nicodemus would have known immediately what Jesus is talking about, because here in this verse and in what He is teaching is He is actually bringing Nicodemus back to Ezekiel 36.

Remember, Nicodemus is someone who has understood the law. He has understood everything about the Torah. He is a person who is living for God, and Jesus calls him back to this image of Ezekiel 36, where essentially God comes to the people of Israel, who have wandered away from Him, and who have been living in sin and rebellion and exile, and He says to them, “One day, when the Messiah comes, you will be born again of water and the Spirit, and I will put a new heart in you that will be renewed from within you. It is not something that you have to do for yourselves. It is something that only God can do for you,” and so essentially what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus here is, “The life you are looking for, that longing that you have within your heart, this idea is not new. God has said this all the way back in the prophets, that you need God to make your life new, and He has promised that He will do that,” and Jesus is essentially trying to point to Nicodemus and say, “Maybe that is happening in front of you right now. What are you going to do about it?”

That is why Jesus says, essentially that flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to the Spirit. Actually, on the face of it, it makes a lot of sense. He is just saying that fleshly things can only produce fleshly results, but if you want a spiritual rebirth, if you want to be made new, then it is not that you can just work through fleshly means of Project Self or trying to curate the life you want. You have to receive something from above. Essentially what Jesus is saying to him is “I am telling you that the way to heal the ache and longing and the gap in your life is not through trying to do something for yourself. It is actually allowing someone to do something that you cannot do for yourself.” He is saying you need God to come into your life and renew your life.

Nicodemus is still operating under the paradigm of renovation. If you have ever done a renovation project, it sounds like a lot of you have not, because you do not watch HGTV, but I have, because I have watched them, so I am an expert, right? If you watch enough TV or YouTube, you can figure out what to do, but essentially, if you just think about a renovation project, nothing changes about the address. The frame of the house, for the most part, stays relatively the same. You might move a wall here or there. It is repainting. It is fixing things up, but the house is essentially the same house. Nothing has changed about the identity of the house. You have just flipped some things around on the inside, but when you think of birth, and new birth, I mean, it is new life. It is something that is starting fresh, and here is the difference.

If you have ever done a renovation project, you know how much work it is to do it yourself, but if you have ever been born, and I am going to go out on a limb here and say everyone in this room has been born at one time or another. We all have that in our life. Did you do anything to be born? Not a thing. Like, not a thing. It was all your mom, and maybe some doctors or nurses if she needed a little help. It was all her effort, which is why moms have the right to say, “I brought you into the world, and I can take you out of it,” because they did all the work. You did not do any of the work. It was all your mom, and that is essentially the illustration that Jesus is using here.

He is saying, “Nicodemus, you are trying to figure out what the new project is that you can do, and what I am telling you is there is nothing you can do. It is not a renovation of your soul. You have to receive new life, and you cannot do that for yourself. You need someone else to come and fix you. You cannot fix yourself up enough,” and I think on the face of it, all of us probably recognize that. We recognize that there is a level at which we cannot fix ourselves, but then when we leave a conversation like this, and we go actually try to live our lives, we fall under that lie, and we fall under the belief that no, if I just work hard enough, or if I just get the morning routine, or if I just figure out the diet, or if I just figure out this career path, or if I just get the right life coach, or if I just journal enough, or if I just get the essential oils that I need, or whatever it is, that we will get the life that we are longing for. We all have this belief that essentially, if we try hard enough, we can fix ourselves. I mean, there are industries that make billions of dollars built on this belief that if you just get their product in your life, you will find and achieve the life you are longing for, but how well is that working for us? Let’s just run a little experience for a second.

How is self-improvement going in your life or in our world’s lives? I want you to hear me. I am not anti-habits. I am not anti-discipline, but can we admit that even our best upgrades do not go deep enough? I mean, they do not. You can reach the healthier place that you have always been longing for physically, and you can still be a wreck emotionally and internally. You can get promoted or get the job, and you can immediately feel empty. You can make the purchase, and as soon as you drive the car off the lot, or you start using the thing, and you realize, oh yeah, no, it fades, and it does not last. You cannot get your act together enough to fix yourself. You just can’t, because the deepest hunger within every human being is not for a better version of the same life you have. It is for a new kind of life, and Jesus is saying that you cannot produce it. You are flesh, and flesh just produces flesh. So why do you keep looking for the same things to find the answer that has not been found there?

Look to the Spirit, because the Spirit produces the life that you are looking for, and then Jesus says in verse 8, “The wind blows wherever it pleases, and you hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit,” and again, I think we just have to pause and say, “Jesus, what? Okay, so you were talking about water and spirit and flesh, and then now we are bringing wind into that equation. Jesus, what are you talking about?” Essentially in the Greek and in the Hebrew, in both the Old and the New Testament, the word for “wind” and for “spirit” is essentially the same word, and the same word, “ruach,” or “pneuma,” in the Greek, is essentially this way of scripture saying that the Spirit of God is like the wind. It is uncontrollable. No matter how hard you try, you cannot control the wind. We have had some wild wind the last week here in Colorado. You can’t control if you are getting your hair messed up, or you feel like you get out of the car, and the door just swings. You can do nothing to stop the wind. You can’t schedule the wind. You can’t control the wind. You can’t do anything to make sure the wind behaves or operates the way you want it to. You have no control over it, and it is the same with the Spirit, is what Jesus is saying. You cannot control and create this life for yourself. The Spirit moves, and it does what it will, and you simply have to respond to it, which is terrible news if you are addicted to control, and if you want to have control over your life, and you want to figure out how you can fix your life, and Jesus is essentially saying you can’t. You can’t schedule this. You can’t put it into a routine. You can’t figure out the things that you need. You have to simply receive it from the Spirit. I mean, that is bad news if you are addicted to control, but it is good news if you are exhausted of trying

to be in control, and so Jesus essentially says the life that you were looking for, that gap you were feeling, that missing puzzle piece, you cannot find it on your own. New birth, new life begins when you stop trying to heal yourself or fix yourself. You need to look to God.

Nicodemus hears this, and he is understanding all of these illustrations Jesus is using, and then it still does not click. It still does not make sense, because so much of our world then and now is built on the assumption that if you try hard enough, you can fix yourself, and so essentially his question is, “How could this be? How is it something that I just receive from God, and I do not have to earn my way to, that I do not have to fix myself to achieve?” and Jesus says, “Okay, you are a teacher of the law. You should be getting this. I am not saying anything new to you. I do not understand why this is so hard for you to pick up. You should be hearing my words, and it is the same thing that God has told you from the very beginning. You have to receive this. You cannot earn your way into heaven,” and then He says this in verse 13: “No one has gone into heaven except the one who has come from heaven, the Son of Man.” What is Jesus essentially saying there? You cannot build a ladder high enough to get yourself into heaven or get yourself to the life you are looking for. The only person who can get to heaven is the one who has been in heaven and who has come down. Heaven has come to you. God is not asking you to try to earn your way there. Jesus has come to you, and again, a verse that feels a little weird to us: “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.

Does anybody know what this is a reference to? Say it again. Nehushtan? Yeah. The plague and the solution for the plague. Moses. Yes. Moses, that is true. That is actually in there. So that is a good answer, but you got it. So, there is a very particular story, and I want to call attention to it, because there are actually a few stories with Moses and a snake. Like when God comes and tells him that he is supposed to lead the people to freedom, his staff turns into a snake, and then there are also other places where the plague happens, and there are snakes, and Aaron’s snake eats the Pharaoh’s snake, and there is all that. There is actually another story that is a little less well-known, and it is from Numbers 21, and essentially what happens in Numbers 21 is this. The people of God have been freed from the land of Egypt, and they are wandering through the wilderness trying to get to the promised land, and all along the way, God is providing for them. He is providing for them shade by day. He is providing warmth and light by night for them. He is providing food for them so that they literally pick up off of the ground daily so that they never go hungry, but they keep getting into this rut where life is not what they wanted it to be. They have been rescued from slavery in Egypt, and they begin to grumble, because it seems like that is what they are best at, and they say, “God, this did not really work out the way we wanted it to. There is no bread out here. There is no water. The food that you have given us is detestable.” That is what they say to God. The food that you are providing for, which if you’ve been a parent of a toddler, you know that feeling, where you are just like, “It is mac and cheese. You asked for the mac and cheese,” right? It is that moment, and it is this angry mob that is coming against God, and they are not just grumbling. They are rejecting God, and they are choosing to reject God because life is not turning out the way that they thought it would when God freed them, and so they grumble, they complain, and they are frustrated, and they are angry, and they reject God, and what we are told in Numbers 21 is that in response to this rejection, God sends poisonous snakes in among the camp, and people are bitten.

Now, this story is like my nightmare, okay? I hate snakes, but there are these poisonous, venomous snakes that come into the camp, and they bite people, and people are dying, and it wakes the people of God up to the fact that they have rejected God and rebelled against Him, and so they go to Moses, and they say, “Will you please pray for us for God to remove the snakes?” and Moses says, “Yep, I will pray for God to remove the snakes.” He goes, and he prays for God to remove the snakes, and God does not remove the snakes. Instead, what God does is He tells Moses to take a staff with a beam across the top and to make a bronze snake across the beam, getting the image, and He says, “If the people are bitten, they can look to this staff with the snake, and they will be healed.” It is really fascinating, because God sent the snakes, so He could have taken the snakes away. So why have Moses build a staff? Because it feels a little bit like weird black magic stuff, right? Like to build a staff with a snake on the top and have people look at it, and that is what will heal them. What is the purpose? What is God doing? God is trying to make it so abundantly clear that He alone is the one who can save them, that He alone is the one who has the antidote to the poison that they are experiencing in their life, so He does not remove the snakes. He tries to point the people to the thing that will heal them.

Here is why this is such a perfect illustration, and Jesus is a masterful teacher as He is coming to Nicodemus, because for Nicodemus, life has not turned out the way he had hoped. He is grumbling, he is frustrated, he is trying to figure out what the answer is, and essentially Jesus is trying to tell him it lies in God alone. God alone can heal your soul. Now this is important, because we live in the golden age of self-healing. I mean, if you want to figure out how to heal yourself, buy a cold plunge, listen to this podcast, get these supplements, or do this therapy. There are a thousand different ways that you can heal yourself, but what about the deeper things you can't fix, the guilt and shame that no number of essential oils will ever wash away? What about the patterns that you hate, that you keep repeating, and you want to find freedom from? What about that ache that will not go away underneath the accomplishments that you achieve? Jesus is saying, “You do not need healing. You need salvation.”

As I mentioned, I hate snakes, and if you have this picture in Numbers 21 of the people coming into the camp, and they are being bitten, and people are dying because there is a venom that they cannot heal within themselves, and this is why that image works so powerfully. It is that if you are bitten, there are probably two responses that are the worst things you could do. One is you were bitten by a poisonous snake. Let's say you are out hiking in the hogback, and you get bitten by a rattlesnake, and you just think, “Oh, you know what? That is probably not a big deal. I am sure that will just work itself out. That is not going to do me in. It was just like probably a little thing.” That is wrong. You only have hours to deal with the thing that is going to take your life. The other solution you could come up with that is probably equally as dangerous is to say, “You know what? I am just going to really, okay, I am just going to do some breath work. I am going to really will it to not take my life. I am going to try really hard to make the venom not kill me. I am going to think positive thoughts, and I am going to just make sure that I do whatever I can to say like, ‘No, venom, you will not take my life today.’” I mean, and yet the problem is the venom is meant to kill you.

What happens in so many of our lives is that as we live in a snake-bitten reality, the venom of sin and death is inside all of us, and it is there to take and steal your life. It is there to kill you, and the problem so many of us have is that we are misdiagnosing the problem we have. We think we just need a routine.

Jesus is saying, “You are dying.” There is a venom within you that you cannot heal yourself, that sin is not just bad behavior. It is not just mistakes we make. It is a condition, a poison that we cannot extract ourselves, and you can’t will your way past it. You can’t journal enough to overcome it. You cannot try hard enough to solve this venom within you, that death is not something that happens to us at the end of our lives. It is actually a condition that we are plagued with now, and no amount of workouts or dieting will keep you from dying. He is saying you need to be healed. Sin and death are a venom that are poisoning our lives, and we do not have the antidote. You do not have the antidote, and so what Jesus is saying and why this story is so perfect for Nicodemus is He is saying, “Nicodemus, the gap you are feeling, it is death. It is sin. It is something you cannot solve yourself, and just as God sent this staff with a snake to heal the people of Israel, He has sent the Son of Man to heal the world of this problem and of this venom.” You do not need to heal yourself into life. You need Jesus to heal and to save you.

What is fascinating then is that the story stops there. Nicodemus fades to the background, and the conversation between the two just ends, and then John inserts this little theological commentary about how he would summarize the point of the story that he just told about Jesus. Are you ready for it? “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. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him, and 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.” The most famous verses, potentially in all of scripture, “For God so loved the world,” come out of this story of a man who came to Jesus in the middle of the night, because he knew he was missing something, and Jesus answers him and tells him, “What you are looking for, you cannot find in the world. You need God to save you,” and John says, “Here is the good news. God loved you so much that He sent his Son, that He gave of Himself for you to find and receive the antidote that you could find nowhere else, so that you could have eternal life,” and when He says eternal life, it is not just life someday that you receive when you die. It is life now that is available to you in the power and presence of Jesus. It is resurrection life. It says, for God so loved the world that He did not want you to perish because of that venom, but so that you could have that life now.

Then in verse 17, He says that God did not send his Son to condemn the world, but to save the world, which is good news. The whole point of Jesus’ mission was not to condemn you or to make you feel shame about the venom and the sin and the death, but to heal you from it, but then He says this thing that is interesting: “Whoever believes in Him is not condemned.” That language there is, condemned to death. It is like a judgment, but more than that, it is just like a sentence, so if you have the venom within you, you are going to die. “Whoever believes in Him will not die. Whoever does not believe stands condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”

What is John saying about Jesus’ interaction here? He is saying essentially this, that if you believe in Jesus, you receive the antidote. You receive life. You receive what it is you are longing for, but if you do not believe, if you reject the antidote, then you already stand condemned. You stand sentenced to death. You already have the venom and the death inside of you. It is already there. You are just choosing not to receive that which will make you well, and how many of us live that story out every day? I mean, we reject God’s way, because we think the things of this world will provide us with the life we are looking

for, and Jesus is saying, “You are just drinking more poison. You are just allowing the poison to continue to live in your heart,” and this is why he finishes this story this way.

John says this about this whole story in verse 19: “This is the verdict. This is the truth. Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light, because their deeds were evil.” Light has come into the world to eradicate the evil. There will be some people who reject the light and choose the path of darkness, because they think it will lead them to life. “Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.” They are afraid of coming into the light. They want to remain in the darkness, because they are afraid of what people might see. Essentially the picture we get painted right here is this image, this picture that the darkness is operating like image management. It is all those things that we do not want other people to see, and so we create this façade. We create this identity. We create this structure around our life so people can’t see certain things within our life, because we are afraid of what they might think of us when they see them, and we do the same thing with God. “They are afraid that their deeds will be exposed, and God will see them, 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.” He is saying, God already saw it. God already saw it. It has already been exposed. You were worried about God seeing what you have done. He already knows, and it did not change his decision to send his Son, Jesus.

Love gave of itself to save us from the condition we were already in, so that we could experience life with God, this eternal life, this life that we have always been looking for, but some of us stay hidden in the dark. Where did Nicodemus come to Jesus? In the night, in the darkness, and part of the reason for that is because he was a Pharisee. He was a ruler. He was someone who did not want other people to know that he was going to Jesus for the answer. He was ashamed of what they might think. He was hiding. He was trying to control that image, and the invitation that Jesus gives is to step into the light, and not because the exposure will hurt you, but because it is how you are healed. Stepping into the light is how you receive the antidote. So why do we continue to hide? Coming into the light is what heals us and what allows us to lean into the life that Jesus is offering us, this eternal life that begins now and into the future. It is why I think the whole summary of this encounter that Nicodemus has with Jesus is that Jesus is essentially saying that the life that you were longing for is not something you can achieve. It is something you receive from Jesus. It is not something you can do with your own strength, your own power. You cannot ever achieve this. You simply have to receive it from Jesus. You need to stop hiding and step into the light and receive the life that Jesus has for you.

I play hide and seek with my son, Landon, who is two years old, and truth be told, he is terrible at playing hide and seek, because the whole purpose of hide and seek is what? To hide, and to have someone find you, but he is two, and so he thinks the whole purpose of hide and seek is to be found, and so every time he hides, he goes into a corner, and he covers his eyes, and he is like, “You can’t see me,” and he is like, I literally see all of you right now, right? Like there is no part of you that is sitting there. Last night he was playing with his grandpa, who came to visit, and he was literally hiding between like the wall and a bush, so that you could see all of him. You could even see his eyes, and he is like, “I’m hiding. I’m hiding right now,” and we see him hiding, and then you have to like play along and pretend you can’t see him, but after like two seconds of pretending you can’t see him, do you know what he does? He pops out,

and he goes, I'm here. I'm here. I want to be seen. I want to be found," because the whole purpose when you are that age is actually not to hide from your parents. It is to be found by them. You actually really want for them to see you, to know you, to love you, and here is the deep truth that I think is true for every single one of us in our human hearts. It is deep down, every single one of us longs to be seen and found by our Heavenly Father, and yet somewhere along the way, we stop saying, "I am here," and we start hiding, and we start pretending that we do not want to be found, and we are worried about what might happen when we are found, and we start to try to cover up, and we remain in the darkness, because we are worried about what will happen if we step into the light, and ultimately, that is because we are not sure whether or not the Heavenly Father loves us. Landon wants to be found by me because he knows I love him. He knows how deeply I love him and that my greatest joy is seeing him. That is also true of our Heavenly Father, for God so loved the world. He did not come to condemn you. He did not come to make you hide in shame. He came so that you could step out into the light of his love.

So you might be here today, and you might be in a place where you have actually never stepped into the light, where you have just been living this life, and you feel like you need to earn your way into the life you are looking for, and I am here to tell you, you do not need a renovation. You need a new birth. You cannot fix yourself. You need to be saved. You need to stop hiding and step into the light of the Heavenly Father, who loves you so deeply, and all you have to say is, "I cannot rescue myself. I need Jesus to rescue me." There are others of us here today who have believed in Jesus for a long time, but we are still living like the general contractor of our own soul. We are still living in this place where, yes, Jesus loves me, but we are exhausted, because somewhere along the way we drifted back into self-improvement mode. The invitation for you today is not to try harder. It is to trust deeper and allow the Spirit to do what only the Spirit can do.

That is why I think communion is such an appropriate response for the message today, because when you understand what Jesus has done for you, and we come to the table to remember his body that was broken for us, and the blood that He shed for us because of his love for us, then we recognize that it is not anything we could do to ever earn our way to the table, that Jesus has done everything, and He simply says, "Come, have a seat. Step into the light." So that is the invitation for you today. As you come to the table, if you are a follower of Jesus, and you have given your life to Him, it is simply to come and receive. We do not take communion, we receive communion, because we receive the good news of what Christ has done for us, and He has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. So let me pray for us, and then in a moment I am going to invite you forward. We have gluten-free elements in the center aisles here at the front and in the back, and then on the wings we have elements for everyone else. I want you to come today, and I want you to come if you are exhausted, if you are worn out, if you are tired of being the contractor for your soul, and simply receive the good news of Jesus, the love of the Father, and that you can step into the light. Let me pray for us.

Heavenly Father, God, as we come before you today, God, we come with this knowledge and this recognition that we cannot save ourselves, that our efforts are futile, that there is not enough we could do to heal or fix or save ourselves, that all of the projects and the pressures and all of the ways that we want to improve or try to fix our lives, they fall short of what we actually need. God, what a sweet invitation for exhausted souls and weary minds and tired bodies to say, you do not have to keep trying. You can

simply receive the love of the Father, who sent his Son for you, so that you could have the life of the kingdom. God, may we come to the table today resting in that truth and that knowledge. May it speak to our hearts. It is in Christ's name that we pray, amen. As you are ready, you can come forward to the table.

Here is the benediction. If you feel comfortable, I am going to ask you to hold out your arms and your hands to receive. It is from Ephesians chapter 2, verses 3 and 4: "and all of us lived at one time gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts, and like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath, but because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ Jesus, even when we were dead in our transgressions, and it is by grace you have been saved." Amen? Amen. You may go in peace.

49:46 minutes

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Edited by Tom Kenaston

Message #925