Happy Easter, Moon Valley!

Today we continue our sermon series titled, ▶ “Suffering Embraced.” It is designed to help us think through and live through suffering.

Here’s a question we all face: ▶ What good can come from undeserved suffering?

We have all asked the question because we have all suffered in ways that don’t make sense to us. At least not in the moment.

The biblical text we’re studying today is ▶ John 3:1-16. In this text, there is an exchange between two men from whom we are going to learn something about suffering.

One of them is Jesus, who will suffer.

The other is a man named Nicodemus, who is suffering now and wanting some answers.

Nicodemus is a God-fearing, Bible-believing, devoutly religious, morally upright man who had given his life to public service and upholding traditional values. With some exceptions, Nicodemus is closely aligned with Jesus theologically.

His story begins in ▶ John 3:1. It says,

> ESV John 3:1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

It says here that Nicodemus was one of the Pharisees. Pharisees were members of a Jewish religious sect. The word, “Pharisee” is derived from an Aramaic word meaning, “separated.” And this is certainly fitting

because Pharisees generally wanted to keep themselves separated from other people they considered ungodly or unappreciative of traditional biblical values.

They were deeply knowledgeable about the Hebrew Scriptures—the only part of the Bible that existed in the early first century. They worked very hard at applying the Bible to their lives and to the lives of others. Their emphasis was on obeying God's rules and calling out those who weren't obeying.

Nicodemus was not only a Pharisee, he was also a "ruler of the Jews." That means he was a member of the Jewish ruling council known as the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was made up of 70 members responsible for religious decisions and civil rule over the Jewish people. And so that means Nicodemus was a public servant.

If we peak ahead to ▶ verse 10, we see that Jesus addresses Nicodemus as:

> ESV John 3:10 ". . . the teacher of Israel . . ."

Note that Nicodemus is not just "a" teacher, but "the" teacher. The definite article "the" suggests that Nicodemus was the supreme teacher, the most scholarly and learned member of the Sanhedrin. So, Nicodemus would have been the man voted most likely to go to heaven.

▶ Verse 2 continues our story:

> ESV John 3:2 This man came to Jesus by night . . .

We don't know for sure why Nicodemus came by night, but perhaps it was to avoid being noticed. The time is spring, AD 29, within the first year of Jesus's public ministry. Jesus has already done enough to become a

controversial figure. And so, it may not look good for people to see Nicodemus come to Jesus. After all, Nicodemus was the Bible answer man. How would look for people to see "the teacher of Israel," seeking answers from Jesus. ▶ Verse 2 continues:

> ESV John 3:2 . . . and [Nicodemus] said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God . . ."

Addressing Jesus as, "Rabbi" respectfully acknowledges that Jesus himself was a teacher of the Hebrew Scriptures.

That Nicodemus uses the plural pronoun "we" suggests that, though he has come alone, at least a few on the Sanhedrin are respectful of Jesus as perhaps a man of God. Nicodemus explains why in the next part of ▶ verse 2:

> ESV John 3:2 ". . . for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."

Jesus had performed a number of miraculous signs. Nicodemus stops well short of admitting that Jesus is God himself, but he is leaning toward the idea that God must be with him. The way Nicodemus phrases, "unless God is with him" is something called a third-class condition, suggesting some uncertainty about whether God is really with Jesus.

Nicodemus has barely had a chance to finish his respectful introduction when Jesus cuts right to the chase. ▶ Verse 3 says:

> ESV John 3:3 Jesus answered him, . . .

Which is curious. Because Nicodemus hasn't asked a question yet.

But Jesus knows the question Nicodemus has in mind, so he answers it in ▶ verse 3, saying:

> ESV John 3:3 . . . “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Now, if that’s the answer, then what is the unspoken question?

I want to show you that the question is probably something along the lines of: “When will we see God’s kingdom?” And the question is related to suffering. Let me explain.

Remember, Nicodemus is “the teacher of Israel.” So, surely he knew that, according to 2 Samuel 7:12-16, God had promised that a Messiah would be “raised up” who would come as a descendant of David to save the Jews and become their king. Nicodemus joined all devout Jews in expecting a king to be raised up one day.

Remember that expectation: A king will be raised. Save it to your mental desktop because we’re going to keep coming back to it: a king will be raised. A king will be lifted up.

At the time when Nicodemus was talking with Jesus in our text, Jews were chafing under Roman rule. They were suffering.

There was political oppression. Although the Sanhedrin was the highest Jewish authority, they themselves had to operate as puppets under authority of the Roman Empire.

There were also religious tensions. The pagan practices of the Roman Empire were deeply offensive to many Jews.

There was also economic exploitation. The Romans levied heavy taxes collected by locals who unscrupulously added their own fees, leading to economic hardship and resentment among the Jews.

There was also social unrest. The Jewish population was splintered into various groups who responded differently to Roman rule, including Zealots who sought to overthrow Roman authority, fomenting periodic uprisings. The Pharisees were not far behind the Zealots in their anti-Roman sentiments.[1] Indeed, the Great Jewish Revolt was on the near horizon.

There was also an ominous military presence. Roman soldiers were stationed in Judea to enforce order, sometimes violently, stoking further resentment.

And all this was happening in Judea, the land God had given the Jews, with Jerusalem and the temple as its religious hub.

As a leader of the Jews in Judea, Nicodemus felt the burden of his people's suffering. No doubt he joined his people in longing for the Messiah, the king, whom they expected to be raised up to overthrow the Roman Empire and set up his political kingdom on earth.

The kingdom of God was expected to consist of the king who would be raised up. And the people of his kingdom would be the religious people who were faithfully obeying God. It was believed that you get into the kingdom by being religious enough and being good enough.

So, Nicodemus was wondering when this was going to happen. "When will we see God's kingdom?" Bound up with this question was a related one: "When will we be liberated from our suffering?" It had been a thousand years since a saving Messiah had been promised.

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[1] https://www.worldhistory.org/article/823/the-great-jewish-revolt-of-66-ce/

Nicodemus figured if Jesus was sent from God as some kind of prophet, maybe he had an answer to their suffering.

In verse 3, when Jesus says, “truly, truly, I say to you” it means, “make no mistake, here’s the real deal, listen up, here’s the answer.”

Nicodemus may have expected a time answer. Something like: “You will see the kingdom of God established in two years.”

Or Nicodemus may have expected a moral behavior answer. Something like: “You will see the kingdom of God established when you people shape up.”

But he certainly didn’t expect a birth answer: “unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Jesus is saying, “unless you are born again, you’re not going to see the fulfillment of God’s promise. You’re going to miss it. You will not experience it.”

Nicodemus is baffled and unsettled. He has been waiting and suffering. He has dedicated his whole life to being religious enough and being good enough to be a part of God’s kingdom.

This is crazy talk. Nicodemus is incredulous. ▶ Verse 4 continues:

> ESV John 3:4 Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

Nicodemus is locked onto a horizontal, natural perspective that makes no sense to him. So, Jesus rephrases his answer to encourage Nicodemus to think vertically, from a spiritual perspective. ▶ Verse 5 says,

> ESV John 3:5 Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

This is basically the same thing Jesus said in verse 3. But instead of saying “born again” Jesus clarifies, saying, “born of water and the Spirit.”

For most of us, this doesn't clear things up at all. But we probably don’t know the Old Testament as well as Nicodemus does. “Water” and “Spirit” are common Old Testament symbols associated with the work of the Spirit of God.

The implication is that to be born again is entirely the result of God’s work. To be born again is not at all the result of human work. Humans aren’t going to enter the kingdom of God by being religious or by being good.

Keep in mind, Jesus is saying this to Nicodemus, the man who would have been voted most likely to go to heaven because he was such a good, religious person.

Just in case Nicodemus doesn’t get it. Jesus says it in yet another way in ▶ verse 6.

> ESV John 3:6 “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

Jesus is saying that God is completely in charge of the born again thing; we’re not. We’re not in the driver’s seat. We’re not in control. God is.

And this is very unsettling to anyone who is banking on their own good behavior to find favor with God or get to a better spiritual place. And this describes every major religion on earth. A common thread of the world's major religions is that, in one way or another, you've got to be good enough to get to the better hereafter place. You must be good enough to get into the heaven of Judaism. Or the paradise of Islam. Or the moksha of Hinduism. Or the nirvana of Buddhism. Even many professing Christians today—perhaps most—join other world religions in thinking that, in order to get to the better hereafter place, you must do something to earn it, prove it, or keep it.

But Jesus is contradicting all that. In ▶ verse 7, he says:

> ESV John 3:7 "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'"

Evidently, Nicodemus was indeed marveling. To marvel is to be extraordinarily impressed or disturbed by something. Nicodemus is disturbed by the idea that he is not in control. He is at God's mercy.

And Jesus wants to emphasize how little control we have, how little our behavior or religiosity has to do with being born again. So, in ▶ verse 8, he says:

> ESV John 3:8 "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."

Right about now, Nicodemus is freaked. ▶ Verse 9 says:

> ESV John 3:9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

In verses 10 through 12, Jesus basically says, “My disciples and I have been trying to explain it, but you won't listen.” Here’s how ▶ verses 10 through 12 read:

> ESV John 3:10 Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?”
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> ESV ▶ John 3:11 “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.”
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> ESV ▶ John 3:12 “If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”

All that to say: “We’ve been trying to tell you, but you refuse to believe.”

Now, in ▶ verse 13, Jesus goes on to reiterate what he and his disciples have been trying to say.

> ESV John 3:13 “No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.”

Here, Jesus is claiming to be the Son of Man, the Messiah, the king, the one promised by God. Jesus is God himself descended from heaven.

And if you think that would have been a shock to Nicodemus, just listen to what Jesus says next in ▶ verse 14:

> ESV John 3:14 “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,”

If you don’t get this at all, that would be perfectly understandable. You may not know the Old Testament like Nicodemus does.

Jesus is referring to the historical account of the Jewish people recorded in ▶ Numbers 21:4-9 of the Old Testament. Let me summarize the story. The people of Israel had sinned against God, so God sent poisonous serpents among them, and they bit the people so that many were dying. But God provided a way of salvation. He told Moses to make a bronze serpent to be lifted up high on a pole so that anyone who looked upon it in faith would be healed.

Because of their sin, the people were dying and there was absolutely nothing they themselves could do about it. They couldn't cure themselves by resolving to be better or more religious. They were not in control; they were at God's mercy.

But God provided a way of salvation. God arranged it. All the people had to do was look up in faith to the serpent who had been lifted up.

Jesus is saying that, in the same way, the Son of Man, the King is going to be lifted up—to be raised up, just like the serpent.

Jesus explains the saving purpose in ▶ verse 15:

> ESV John 3:15 "that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

You can imagine the questions swirling in Nicodemus's head.

How is the King going to be lifted up such that whoever looks upon him in faith will have eternal life? And what does this have to do with the kingdom of God and being liberated from our suffering?

That's what Nicodemus wants to know.

And that's the context for the most famous Bible verse in the world. Jesus now says in ▶ John 3:16:

> ESV John 3:16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

These words were originally spoken, not to an atheist, not to an agnostic, not to a seeker trying to find God, but to a God-fearing, Bible-believing, devoutly religious, morally upright man who had given his life to public service and upholding traditional values.

Jesus is encouraging that man to reconsider his faith.

Because the man who would have been voted most likely to get to heaven is not going to make it. Not unless he trusts in Christ alone for eternal life, instead trusting in his own efforts.

Does Nicodemus get it? Does he believe?

We're not told. We can't be sure. Maybe not at this point.

Believers today have the benefit of hindsight. We can look back. We know what's coming. We try to coach Nicodemus. "Connect the dots. Jesus is the King. Jesus is the King that is going to be raised up. Not yet to a political throne. But to the cross. To be crucified in payment for our sins. So that he can offer eternal life to all who simply believe him for it."

But at the time Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, it was spring, AD 29, several years before Jesus was crucified, and nobody—not even Jesus's disciples—understood or expected the crucifixion.

Does Nicodemus ever get it? Let's think about this.

Over 2 years later, in the fall of AD 31, members of the Sanhedrin are deeply offended by Jesus and are seeking to arrest him. Nicodemus seems to defend Jesus, but not strongly. In ▶ John 7:51, Nicodemus says,

> ESV John 7:51 “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?”

Still later, within days of his crucifixion, as recorded in ▶ John 12:32, Jesus says to a crowd gathered in Jerusalem.

> ESV John 12:32 “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

Was Nicodemus there to hear the familiar refrain of a king lifted up?

Just a few verses later, John ▶ 12:42 tells us:

> ESV John 12:42 . . . many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it . . .

Was Nicodemus one of the authorities who believed but kept it a secret so his fellow Pharisees would not turn on him?

Finally, in the spring of AD 33, the Sanhedrin is completely fed up with Jesus and arranges for his crucifixion.

Nicodemus would have been there. He would have seen Jesus, nailed to a cross. And then lifted up.

This was not the triumphant political savior Nicodemus had in mind—the one who would liberate his people from suffering. Jesus was more like the

suffering servant described hundreds of years earlier in ▶ Isaiah 53:3-6, with which Nicodemus would have been familiar.

> ESV Isaiah 53:3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. ▶ 4 Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ▶ 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

Nicodemus would have seen the inscription that Pilate put on the cross to mock Jesus. The one that said, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."

A king will be raised. A king will be lifted up.

Nicodemus would have remembered the words Jesus spoke to him privately that night nearly four years earlier from ▶ verses 14 and 15:

> ESV John 3:14 "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

Does Nicodemus get it? Does he believe?

John 19 tells us that two men took the dead body of Jesus down from the cross to prepare it for burial.

One was Joseph of Arimathea. The other was Nicodemus.

It was the custom of the Jews to anoint the deceased with myrrh and aloes in preparation for burial. Myrrh is a fragrant, gummy resin. Aloes are perfumed saps from the Aloe plant. ▶ John 19:39 says:

> ESV John 19:39 Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight.

The use of myrrh and aloes was not unusual. But the amount certainly was: 75 pounds in weight. Ordinary people did not get anointed with nearly that much. That much—75 pounds—would have been reserved for one person and one person only: a king.

On the third day after the crucifixion, word gets back to the Jewish authorities, including Nicodemus, that the tomb is empty (Matthew 28:11-15). Jesus is gone. Some are saying he is risen from the dead.

Imagine the moment Nicodemus hears the news that Jesus has been lifted up in yet another way—this time from the grave.

Does it click? Does the light go on? Is this the aha moment?

A king is risen.
A king is lifted up.
A king whose kingdom is not of this world.
A king who came not to save us from suffering in this life, but to suffer for our sake in payment for our sin that we might enter his eternal kingdom through faith alone.

The most undeserved suffering ever serves the purpose of paying for the most unimaginable and undeserved gift ever: the gift of our eternal salvation.

I think Nicodemus got it. He believed.

But here's the bigger question: Do you? Do you believe in Jesus?

Perhaps you walked in here this morning believing that good people go to heaven because they're good.

They don't.

Perhaps you walked in here this morning believing that you're in control.

You're not.

But the good news is that Jesus is giving you an opportunity to reconsider your faith.

Jesus doesn't want you to miss it.

In ▶ John 3:15, he says of himself,

ESV John 3:15 ". . . whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

In ▶ John 3:16, he says,

ESV John 3:16 ". . . whoever believes in him should . . . have eternal life."

In ▶ John 3:36, he says,

ESV John 3:36 "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life . . ."

In ▶ John 6:47, he says,

ESV John 6:47 “. . . whoever believes has eternal life.”

“Whoever” includes you. In fact, that’s the big idea of this sermon: ▶ “Whoever” includes you.

No matter your background, no matter how badly you think you’ve messed things up, no matter how unworthy or unlovable or unacceptable you think you are, the “whoever” includes you. Whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

And the very same suffering that brings salvation to all who believe also brings comfort to all believers who suffer. In ▶ Romans 8:32, Paul explains the connection.

ESV Romans 8:32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

The logic goes like this:

- If God loved us so much that he made the greatest sacrifice to provide our greatest need, won’t he also provide all our lesser needs?
- If God saved us through his suffering, won’t he also see us through our suffering?
- If he took the cross for us, won’t he also take care of us in every other way?
- If God gave his Son, won’t he also give us everything else we need?

Yes, of course.

I need this assurance.

On Tuesday, our daughter Candace will undergo her tenth neurosurgery spanning forty years. The first was at age four. The last one was twenty years ago.

She is dependent on a plumbing system installed in her brain to relieve pressure from a set of conditions so rare she wears a medical bracelet to explain it to doctors who don't know her, in case something goes wrong.

Candace will get a new valve on Tuesday, and they will replace plumbing as needed when they're in there.

Thankfully, the upcoming surgery is not an emergency. Most of her previous surgeries were. When the plumbing malfunctions, things go south in a hurry.

And the surgeries have left their mark. Not just physically, but also emotionally. Having so many emergency surgeries as a child is a trauma that lingers. Ironically, she still struggles with feelings of shame for putting her family through it, as if she had any choice in the matter.

What good can come from undeserved suffering?

I don't pretend to know the full answer. But I do know that the One who gave his Son for us all has also graciously given our family all the things we really need through all of it.

That doesn't mean we haven't struggled. It means he has sustained us through it.

Most importantly, "whoever believes" includes every member of my family, which means the world to me.

And I want that for you.

Let’s pray. Lord, based on the death and resurrection of Jesus for our sins, you promise that whoever believes in Jesus has eternal life. Please draw someone to faith in this moment such that they are able to say, “whoever includes me.” Amen.