



## Living in HD: It's Worth the Investment – John 3:16-21

### Background Context: Nicodemus the Proud Pharisee

Read John 3:1-21.

At the beginning of the third chapter of John, we meet a prominent Jewish leader by the name of Nicodemus. He came by night to talk with Jesus. He opened with some respectful remarks (verse 2), but look at Jesus' response in verse 3 (NLT unless otherwise noted): "I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God." Not much in the way of pleasantries – just the spiritual realities that Nicodemus needed to hear. He was undoubtedly a good Jew but he was trusting in those good works to save him instead of trusting in a saving God. Max Lucado calls this difference the "Continental Divide of Scripture," and everyone is either on one side or the other no matter what kind of religious pedigree they might possess. To see and enter the Kingdom of God, a person "must be born again" (verse 7). The conversation continues, and in verses 16 and 17, Jesus finally gives Nicodemus the answer he was fishing for in verse 2 ("Rabbi, we all know that God has sent you to teach us"):

*<sup>16</sup> "For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him."*

No Nicodemus, God did not send His Son to teach us but to save the world!

Q: What do you know of Nicodemus from verses 1 and 2? What would he likely think of himself? What does he seem to think of Jesus and Jesus' mission field?

Q: What truth(s) does Nicodemus overlook in saying that "God has sent you to teach us?" What mistaken ideas of Jesus do many people have today? What does Islam believe about Jesus for example? Would the Incarnation still be necessary if Christ's primary mission was to teach us? Why or why not? What is His mission field?

### Study: John 3:16 – God Loves, Gives, and Saves!

Our study will focus on verse 16, although the whole chapter provides important context. John 3:16 is probably the most well known verse in all of Scripture. Lucado calls it the "Hope Diamond" of the Bible (the most famous diamond in the world if you are wondering). In one verse of 29 words (in the NLT), it contains the very essence of the Gospel – the Good News of salvation by grace thru faith in Jesus Christ. Here is the verse, and Gospel, in a nutshell (credit to Lucado's book, *3:16, The Numbers of Hope*):

God loves  
God gave  
We believe  
We live

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Let's study the verse in a little more detail by looking at some key phrases and words:

1. "For God" – God is the provider of everything good, including salvation. It is "unearnable." The awesome Creator of the universe is the One who saves.
2. "Loved the world so much" – What is God's love like? First of all, He loves us not because of who we are or what we are like, but in spite of that. Much of the world is anti-God – even us at one time (and sometimes still?). Read Rom 5:8; Eph 5:2; 1 John 3:1. Scripture says that God's love for us is like that of Hosea for his wife Gomer, even though she was repeatedly unfaithful (See Hosea 1-3). When she finally ended up for sale in a slave market, it was Hosea who bought her back – who redeemed her to be his wife again.

Q: How hard is it to love those who oppose you? Who might actually hate you and want you dead? Have you experienced totally selfless love in any human relationships? Parent? Child? Spouse? Sibling? What is the chief characteristic(s) of such love?

3. "That He gave" – This is the answer to man's (and God's) dilemma. God has an infinite love for us, but He is also perfectly holy, and just, and cannot abide sin. And we are sinners – that's for sure! Read Jer 17:9; Mark 7:21-22; Rom 3:10-11, 23.

Q: Look at just 4 of the Ten Commandments: Do not steal, lie, commit adultery, murder. Considering that Jesus equated some kinds of anger and insult with murder, and equated lust with adultery (Matt 5), how many months, days, hours, or minutes can you go without breaking one of the 4?

So God gave – He provided – a perfect, once-for-all-time sacrifice (as we saw in the Hebrews sermon series) for sin in the Person of His Son. "For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ" 2 Cor 5:21.

4. "His one and only Son" – most of us know this as "His only begotten Son." The Greek word is *monogenes*. It does not mean the only son born in time, but the only Son in the sense of "kind." Jesus Christ is of the same nature as His Father, that is, He is God. At the Incarnation, He also became fully man, but He never ceased being God. Because Jesus Christ is also infinite God, He is able to save completely and eternally even all the billions who believe in Him.
5. "So that everyone who" – I still think I prefer the "whosoever" of the KJV or the "whoever" of many other translations, but the point is the same, there are no qualifiers – every person who has ever lived falls into the "everyone who," or "whosoever," or "whoever" category! Read 1 Tim 2:6, Titus 2:11, 2 Pet 3:9. The invitation of Jesus Christ is open to everyone. The invitation also covers *however* – whatever state you may be in; *whenever* – there is no expiration date; and *wherever* – you can't be too far for God's grace to reach you. Lucado says:

*"No status too low. No hour too late. No place too far. However. Whenever. Wherever. Whoever includes you . . . forever."*

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Q: What do you think of the inclusiveness of God's invitation to eternal life? Do you believe it? Do you ever feel like the "whoever" might not include you or some other persons? Why not? Think of the flaws and sins of persons in Scripture – *Whoever!*

"Jesus Christ came not to condemn you but to save you, knowing your name, knowing all about you . . . He knows you individually as though there were not another person in the entire world. He died for you as certainly as if you had been the only lost one. He knows the worst about you and is the One who loves you the most." A.W. Tozer, *And He Dwelt Among Us*.

Q: Is Tozer right? How does it make you feel? Do you have trouble believing it sometimes?

6. "Believes in Him" – There may be no qualifier for persons, but there is a qualifier – our response – we are required to believe in Jesus Christ. All are invited, but not all come. 2 Points here: First, Biblical belief is not just intellectual assent. Remember the Apostle James' words, "You believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this" (2:19). Biblical belief involves obedience – if you believe in something, you take action. Read John 3:36 to see the connection. Second, God's invitation may be inclusive, but our response must be very exclusive – to believe in Jesus Christ – that is the only way to eternal life. Read John 6:29,14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Tim 2:5. Jesus Christ remains the only way!

Q: Read John 3:36 again, in more than one translation if possible. How does this verse sum up the chapter? John contrasts "anyone who believes" with "anyone who doesn't obey." How are the two opposites? How does this add to your understanding of what it means to believe?

7. "Will not perish but have eternal life" – The two choices in our response to God's invitation have two distinct results. First the bad news: Hell is real and oh how I wish it wasn't. But we cannot ignore Scripture. Two thirds of Jesus' parables involve last things and judgment. Read Matt 10:28. What can be more terrible than the pronouncement of Matt 7:23, "I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God's laws." C.S. Lewis says this:

*"Man has free will [and so] all gifts to him are therefore two-edged . . . Some will not be redeemed . . . In the long run the answer to all those who object to the doctrine of hell, is itself a question: 'What are you asking God to do?' To wipe out their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing over every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But He has done so, on Calvary. To forgive them? They will not be forgiven." From *The Problem of Pain*.*

Lewis believes, and I agree, that Scripture teaches that those that perish choose to do so – that they are successful rebels to the very end; "that the doors of hell are locked on the *inside*." God does not want *any* to perish – Ezek 33:11; 1 Tim 2:3-4; 2 Pet 3:8-10 – but some refuse to believe and be saved, cursing to the very end (Rev 16:9).

But the very good news is that for those of us who believe we receive eternal life, beginning "the hour we first believed," and coming to perfection in heaven. Read Rev 21:3-4; 22:3-5. This is not just "pie in the sky." It is the real wish of every child and some adults – those who have not buried it under modern "reality." It is the return to the perfection of God's Creation in Gen 1:31. Randy Alcorn says this:

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“Earth is an in-between world touched by both Heaven and Hell. Earth leads directly into Heaven or directly into Hell, affording a choice between the two. The best of life on Earth is a glimpse of Heaven; the worst of life is a glimpse of Hell.”

Q: What do you think of hell and heaven? Embarrassment? Some disbelief? That they are unfair or unjust? Or great relief that this world isn't "all there is?" Do you ever feel that this world is not your true home? Do you ever feel that you were made for something or somewhere else?

### Conclusion: Nicodemus the Humble Christ-follower

The story of Nicodemus doesn't end in John 3. He may not have "gotten it" in that first meeting with Jesus, but he at least began to get it. We meet him again in John 7:50 where he argues, at the cost of ridicule from other Pharisees, that Jesus should be given a fair hearing. We meet him one last time after Jesus is crucified. In John 19:38-42, he and Joseph of Arimathea publicly – not at night this time – ask Pilate for permission to take Jesus' body and bury Him properly and with dignity. He has crossed the "Continental Divide" from hoping in his good works to faith in the work of Jesus Christ, and his belief resulted in humble action. As Max Lucado concludes:

"Christ-followers go public with their belief. We turn from bad behavior to good (repentance). We stop following our passions and salute our new captain (confession). We publicly demonstrate our devotion (baptism). We don't keep our choice a secret. Why would we? We're on our way home for Christ's sake."

Q: What do you think of Joseph and Nicodemus? Do they give you hope? What did their faith cost them? What would be a modern equivalent of their conversions? What is the most remarkable story of redemption that you know of?

John Newton, the author of "Amazing Grace," had been the captain of a slave-trading ship before his conversion. He never forgot what God had done for him and toward the end of his life he summed up his Christian belief in these words:

*"Although my memory's fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior."*