

John 3:16 In Context

The Gospel in One Verse

Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Given 13-Jun-26; Sermon #1880

Many of you old-timers, I am talking about people my age and a little bit older, we go back to the 60s or 70s or early 80s, and we remember watching major sports telecasts on broadcast TV, you know, ABC, NBC, CBS. We would see, especially at these major sports events, a man with rainbow colored hair in an afro. We would see him pop up on the screen. He was usually under the basket at NBA games, like the NBA Finals that are going on right now. (He is not doing this now, by the way.) He would be behind home plate at Major League baseball games. He would be between the uprights at NFL games.

And by the way, he did not go just to those sports. He also ended up appearing at the Olympics. I think that was the one in Los Angeles. He was there at the '84 Olympics. He ended up at the Masters golf tournament. I do not know how the people at Augusta National let him in. That just does not make any sense. And the Indianapolis 500, I guess he was in the pits during the Indianapolis 500. If he had have been any closer to the track, he would have been run over.

But most of the time, especially after the 1980 Super Bowl, he held up a sign that read John 3:16. And the man known for doing this at sporting events all over America was named Rollen Stewart, also known as Rainbow Man and Rock'n Rollen.

He started appearing at high profile sports events in 1977 and he usually was able to get into these events because fundamentalist Christians who liked his message, John 3:16, would give him tickets. By the summer of 1979 (remember he started in 1977), at the Major League Baseball All-Star Game, broadcasters were already tired of his shenanigans on screen and they actively tried to avoid showing him on their programs.

However, his fame did nothing but spread. I think them limiting his exposure probably helped that. And by the time he was done doing all these things, he had been at many other sporting events and in a Budweiser commercial. I do not know if you remember that, but he showed up in one of those. They actually *asked* him to be on it.

Now, from that point, Rollen Stewart's life and beliefs got weirder and weirder as the eighties rolled on. He believed that God had called him to expose ungodly things across America using more effective and proactive tactics. So he began bombing various businesses that he felt were evil or producing evil products, and he would bomb them, not with explosive bombs that would result in damage and fire, but with stink bombs. He was conveying the message that these things that these companies were doing or producing stunk in God's nostrils.

Finally, in 1992, he was convicted for a botched kidnapping and hostage situation in Los Angeles at a hotel there where he used his signature stink bombs and threatened a maid with a revolver. He just progressed until he was entirely wacko.

Rollen Stewart is currently serving three consecutive life sentences in a California prison and every time he comes up for parole, he is denied. Evidently, he is still crazy. He turned out to be a certifiable lunatic and a felon. But his early message actually endured beyond all that. It was like, "Ah, that's just Rollen." But his message, of course, was John 3:16. And it has endured so much that you watch various sporting events now and you still see people wearing or holding up signs that say John 3:16. It became a cultural, and even you might say, a Christian fundamentalist staple in the country.

Many of you may remember Tim Tebow, quarterback of the Florida Gators, went into the NFL for a few seasons, but he repopularized it by writing John 3:16 on his anti-glare patches that he wore under his eyes during games. He still does stuff like that on social media.

Think about it. John 3:16 is a wonderful verse. Even though it has been popularized into meaninglessness almost, it is the number one verse in terms

of popularity here in America at least. And it contains an amazing hopeful message. It proclaims God's love for His human creation. As well, it contains the gist of His purpose for all mankind.

Oh yeah, it is a great verse, a great one to have as a memory scripture and one you should probably teach your children fairly early. Many have called it the gospel in miniature or the gospel in one verse. And there are pros and cons to calling it that, which we will get into.

But it is a very concise statement of Christ's message and God's purpose. So, it is a great one to have always at the top of your mind. But when a complex, very comprehensive matter is boiled down to a single sentence, you have to leave a lot out. There is a great deal of detail you have to sacrifice to put it into one sentence unless you are William Faulkner and you make a sentence that is pages long.

But normally, you are not going to memorize pages-long sentences. John 3:16 only has a few words in it and that is easily memorizable, but there is a lot that is not there. Everyone should know, I mean anyone with a brain should know that no single verse in the Bible contains all the truth a person needs for salvation.

Now, some evangelical Protestants would probably dispute that. They have ways of taking it down to just little generalizations and they think they know. Like WWJD: what would Jesus do? That became the gospel for several years there when WWJD was all over all kinds of cups and bumper stickers and hats and wristbands and everything.

And again, it is a wonderful concept for us to think every time we want to do something, would Jesus do this? It is the truth, but it is not the whole gospel. It is not everything you need to know, and the same could be said of John 3:16. I mean, think about it. God included more than 31,000 additional verses in His Word to convey His full message. So, you are not going to find any one verse that says everything you need to know.

So John 3:16, as magnificent as it is, leaves out or glosses over a lot of necessary truth. It is like Acts 16:31, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." That is another one they like to quote out there and you

know it is part of every altar call in some of their services. "All you have to do is believe on the Lord Jesus" and sometimes they will say you have to confess your sins or whatever but all you have to do is believe and you will be saved.

You say the believer's prayer and you are saved. Have they ever heard of baptism? Ever heard of the laying on of hands? I mean, you could probably come up with a dozen things that is left out of that verse that are necessary parts of our salvation.

So Acts 16:31, it is true as far as it goes. But the concepts of belief and salvation that it touches on are far broader than that. People have a hard time nailing down just what belief is. And what does it mean to be saved? We throw around theological words like that carelessly sometimes and leaving out the fact that there are huge areas of study that go into those concepts.

So it is with John 3:16. And those concepts too are in there, belief and salvation. Plus, it touches on God's love, the work of the Son, grace. It is not mentioned, but it is certainly there in the background. Eternal death, which a lot of Protestants do not believe in at all because they believe that you have an immortal soul, so how could you have eternal death? You will just go to hell if you are not saved. And of course, the one that is mentioned there, finally, is everlasting life. What is everlasting life? What is eternal life? Huge, huge concepts.

Now we are not going to go into all of those today. We do not have time. I could do probably a series of sermons that would take me to the end of my days to finish if I was going to go into these concepts at any depth. But what we are going to do in this sermon is look at John 3:16 in its context, that is, John 3, and we are going to see how it fits in here. Because what people have done is pulled it right out of its native habitat, if you will, and the context gives us significant background and detail as to what Jesus was getting at. Now, there will not be any "aha" moments I do not think in this sermon, but there will be a lot of deep background and understanding that is presented in John 3 so that we really get the picture of what Jesus was trying to drive home to Nicodemus. And of course to anybody who would read this.

So let us go to John 3:16. And we will be in this chapter most of the sermon. We will be going to various scriptures here and there but please stick a ribbon in here or a piece of paper or whatever you use as a bookmark because we will be coming back here quite a bit.

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

That is about, I do not know, I did not even count. It is probably about 20 words. But easy to memorize, especially for young kids with their bright and fresh brains. And you know, all those of us with moldy, oldie brains should be able to do it too.

Now, we should notice three things here. The first thing we should notice is that this verse lies in the middle, a little bit toward the end, but we will just say the middle of a long discourse. The discourse runs from basically verse 3 all the way to verse 21.

In this sermon, I am going to assume that this entire section records Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. Your Bible may have it split out differently. They may put the end quotation after verse 15 because a lot of scholars believe that verses 16 through 21 are John's commentary on what Jesus had just said to Nicodemus.

I am going to assume that the whole 3 through 21 was Jesus speaking. That makes it a little easier in the Greek that we get this from. There are no quotation marks, no other punctuation marks that would tell us one way or another whether Jesus was speaking or not from verse 16 to 21. So we are just going to treat the whole thing as "red letter," if you will, what Jesus said to Nicodemus.

Now verse 16 being where it is, is supported by a great many verses before and after. So it does not stand alone. We cannot afford to cut it out of its context and treat it as a proof text because we will definitely miss what Christ really meant if we do that.

Part of the thing that we will see that we will miss is timing. I will not go into that a lot, but people take this at face value, meaning from Jesus' point on, this is what would happen. But Jesus is not talking necessarily about *now*. We will get into that in a minute. Part of what He is talking about happens now, but a lot of what He is talking about is very general and is apropos for all time. We will get to that in a bit.

The second thing that we need to know is that this verse begins with the word *for*. F O R. It is *gar* in Greek. This word could have a couple of different meanings. It could mean the same thing as thus or therefore. So it can indicate a concluding statement or express a summary of what has come before. Or it could make an inference that can be reached based on the preceding information. So, a lot of times you will see *for*, *therefore*, *thus*, *since*, *because*; these are all transitional statements, conjunctions, what have you, that give you an indication that something is coming up that is one of these things: a summary, a conclusion, an inference.

In this case, I think that *for* here works like *because*, or *since*. "Whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." That is verse 15. "*Because* God so loved the world that He gave," or "*Since* God so loved the world that He gave." So *because* or *since* supply a reason or an explanation and I think that is what John 3:16 is doing here. It is supplying a reason for why God had His Son come to earth and be lifted up, be crucified. It helps to explain God's reasoning for sending His Son to this earth.

The third thing that we need to notice about John 3:16 is that this follows Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus about being born again or born from above. He is talking about a spiritual birth or rebirth. In other places, it is called a regeneration. It is a making new, giving new life to.

I do want to go right now to Matthew 19. This word regeneration is not used here in John 3, but I want to show you two places that it is used. And that is first in Matthew 19 and we are going to go to verse 28.

Matthew 19:28 "Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

We can get a very good sense here, a definite sense that Jesus is using the word regeneration to talk about the new life that will occur after His arrival. That those who we call firstfruits will be regenerated. They will be given a new life.

Worldwide [WCG] in their telling of the born again doctrine use this frequently to say this is what Jesus was talking about. We will be regenerated in the resurrection. They forgot or purposely did not use Titus, the third chapter.

Titus 3:5 Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.

Now what is the time context here? The time context is baptism and the laying on of hands when you are given the Holy Spirit. So this idea of regeneration occurs both at the very beginning of the process and also at the end of the process so there should not be a discussion or an argument that Jesus is talking about only the time of regeneration when He returns. He is talking mostly, actually, about the regeneration that happens at the beginning of our conversion. He uses that we have to be born of the water and the Spirit.

Again, He is talking about being baptized in water and He is also talking about being given the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands. But it works for both. But we need to understand that His emphasis in talking to Nicodemus here is not about the ultimate effect of being born again as being changed into spirit. He is talking about coming out of the world and being saved at the beginning through belief in Jesus Christ and going through the ritual of baptism and having hands laid on so one can have the Holy Spirit and understand and begin to do the things of God. Otherwise, before then, you cannot do that.

We know that some of my dad's sermons that he gave, not necessarily on this, but he told us and proved it from the Scripture that we cannot even *seek* God when we are out in the world unconverted. It is impossible. He is the

one that has to tap you on the shoulder and start making changes before we can turn around and actually seek Him. So this is what He is talking about with Nicodemus.

Let us go back to John 3, verse 1. We will go all the way down to 15.

John 3:1-15 There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know [he is referring to his fellows in the Sanhedrin, in the Jewish leadership] that You are a Teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." Jesus answered and said to him [Have you ever thought that Jesus' answer here just had nothing to do with what Nicodemus had just told him? Jesus gets right to the point.], "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you can hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus answered and said, "How can these things be?" [He is not getting it.] Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended to heaven but He came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. [That last bit is probably an insertion by John.] And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting [eternal] life.

We have gotten through this far because these are the verses that lead up to the statement and I want to take these first before we go any further.

Now this discussion here between Jesus and Nicodemus defines what Jesus ultimately says or what Jesus means by what He says, "whoever believes in Him" in verse 16. So what He is doing here is laying the groundwork for Nicodemus and thus us also to understand the difference between those who believe in Him and those who do not believe in Him. Because the ones who believe in Him have everlasting life. The ones who do not believe in Him will perish.

And so He is telling Nicodemus here what makes a believer. What has to happen to make a person a believer? By doing this, Jesus greatly restricts the extent of those people from the world who will, at least for now, receive everlasting life. In this age, the one we are living in now, Jesus has not returned yet. We are between the time of His life on earth and His crucifixion, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, *and* His second coming. That is still in the future. And so this lays the groundwork for *now*, who are those who are really believers in Jesus Christ?

We know (we will not go there), Luke 12:32 says that those who believe in Him are a little flock. They are the ones whom the Father calls personally and gives the Kingdom in His good pleasure. So He calls them and says, "I'm giving you the Kingdom of God," once they repent and have the Holy Spirit and such. All this happens at God's good pleasure. It is all by grace, we would say. It is His favor upon us that He has chosen specific ones. He has called the elect one by one and brought them to Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ then, as the Head of the church, takes over our education and conversion or change into the image of Jesus Christ.

Now, we saw that Jesus said to Nicodemus that the things he was talking about are heavenly truths. They are spiritual truths, and Nicodemus at this point could not get it at all. He could not understand. He was stuck on the physical here. But Jesus was talking way up here in the stratosphere of spiritual things, whereas Nicodemus was thinking way down here in terms of physical birth. Jesus said, "No, no, no, no. Aren't you supposed to be one of the smart ones? I'm not talking about physical here. I'm talking about heavenly things."

But there is also an indication that He is talking about things that are happening on this earth and it is happening to earthly human beings. But what is happening is not something you can see. So it is an invisible process. They cannot be seen by the naked eye, this change, this being born again. Because they do not take place in a woman's body and you see a baby come out. That is not what He is talking about here at all.

They take place in the heart or mind of a person inside, in their spirit. And it is happening because of the action of the Holy Spirit upon us. So even if Jesus could have tried to show Nicodemus, there would be nothing that he could see. This is something that he could only comprehend in his mind but he did not have the mindset yet. He did not have the Holy Spirit yet to help him to construct this in an understandable way in his own mind. So this is why Jesus answers Nicodemus as He does in verse 3.

Remember I said Jesus does not seem to answer what he said. Nicodemus in verse 2 acknowledges that Jesus was sent by God and he used signs and wonders that Jesus performed as proof that those who were in his group, whether it was the Sanhedrin as a whole or whether it was a smaller group of the Jewish leaders that sent Nicodemus, they were depending on these physical proofs.

They were signs done by spiritual power, but the signs manifested in physical things. Physical healing, casting out of a demon. You could see the person, you know, he was agitated and foaming at the mouth and he was saying the demonic things and Jesus laid hands on him or however he decided to work out the exorcism, and suddenly the man was normal and sane again.

It was something that they could see. He fed 5,000. He fed 4,000. He touched lepers and all their sores and everything went away and their skin was as white as snow. Those things could be seen.

I am sure there was not anybody from the Sanhedrin there, but let us say, you know, the disciples are going across the Sea of Galilee and there is a great storm and Jesus says "calm down" and the storm stills. The wind goes down. That is a physical manifestation of the power of God.

And so this is what Nicodemus opened up with. We know you are from God because we have *seen* it. We have seen the signs. "Yay us! Aren't we smart?"

Jesus does not even blink. He says "unless one is born again [or born from above], he cannot see the kingdom of God." He is saying, "Nick. Come on!" I mean, He actually does this a couple of times in this short discourse. He takes Nicodemus to task one way or another for not making the connection here.

You cannot see the Kingdom of God. Not now. It does not come by observation, He said in another place. It is not something that you and your buddies in the Sanhedrin are going to be able to see manifest itself in. "We're going to kill Romans and take over the world." That is what they wanted to see. They wanted to see Jesus do something great, a great miracle that would wipe the Romans right out of Judea and Samaria and Galilee. Jesus said, "No, Nicodemus. You have to be born again to see what I'm doing here."

And He switches from normal sight as Nicodemus is talking about to when Jesus uses "see" to mean insight, understanding, comprehension. We use it all the time this way. We talk about physical sight, we say, "we see." Somebody explains something to us and it is not something you can see. It is a more abstract idea. We say, "Oh, I see." But there is an interplay here where Nicodemus is talking about the physical sight and Jesus is talking about this insight or understanding that a person needs to have in order to understand the Kingdom of God at this time. Right now. As Nicodemus needed to see it in historical time, whatever it was, 27, 28, 29 AD. What we need to understand it in 2026. Because the Kingdom of God has not been manifested as a physical, if you will, nation. Not yet.

And so we are confined here in what Jesus is explaining to this present evil world, as Mr. Armstrong used to say, and the people coming out of it into the church by God's calling and grace to make up the Kingdom of God. But right now it is a spiritual kingdom. It is a spiritual realm and this is the point that Jesus is trying to make to Nicodemus. "Stop trying to get Me to overthrow the Romans and set up Judah again as a nation. I'm not here to set up a nation on this earth. I'm here to call a people who will be translated," if you will, "into the Kingdom of God, but it's entirely spiritual right now." That is why

they must be born again or born from above because they have to go from a physical mindset to a spiritual one.

Let us move on a little bit.

So Nicodemus emphasizes what he could see, what could be verified with the senses. And Jesus' reply is essentially, the Kingdom of God is not about what you can sense. It is a spiritual reality. Those who are thus changed must undergo a ritual. He goes on to talk about the water and the Spirit which are indicating baptism and the laying on of hands to receive the Holy Spirit.

Those physical rituals that we go through are, well, I will just say they symbolize greater spiritual developments in the person. And you can *see* somebody going through baptism. You can *see* somebody having hands laid on him. But did you ever see the person die in the waters of baptism? Was there any cleansing from sin that you actually saw? Did you see the Holy Spirit come down on a person who was having hands laid on him?

No, those are physical rituals. We are supposed to go through them, but they symbolize spiritual things actually happening at that point that you cannot see. But a person who is being converted knows that those things are happening. They have gone through Romans 6 and they understand that when they are put under the waters of baptism, they are recreating in ritual form the death and the burial of Jesus Christ and so they die with Him and thus when they are brought up out of the water, they are raised to life in Jesus Christ.

You can see the physical actions. You cannot see the spiritual realities because those are happening between God and the new convert, spiritually, in the heart and the mind. Now, when this happens, and over a period of time, you can begin to see a change. You begin to see the results of these things happening, just like He talks about here though, the wind blowing, you can see trees move in the wind, but you cannot see the wind. You see trees fall down in Tinley Park or whatever because of the great winds that come through here on occasion, but you do not see the wind. You could see the dust being carried or you could see trash being blown or whatever, but you cannot see the actual force that is driving all that to happen.

So we can see the results or the effects of the spiritual change that is happening. But the formation of the new man is mostly invisible. You cannot see it, you cannot sense it.

Thus, this phrase, "whoever believes in Him" that Jesus uses in John 3:16 is not one who has changed physically as the Jews always looked at it. You know, they did things physically to prove that they were God's people. Of course, at the top of that list would be circumcision. That was a physical change that showed that they were God's people, the descendants of Abraham. And they wore tassels. They did not trim their beards. They wore phylacteries on their forearm and on their forehead. They would sprinkle ashes on their head to show that they were in mourning or they were repentant. They rent their clothing. The Pharisees really loved to stand out on the street and make public prayers to show that they were righteous people.

That is not what Jesus meant by whoever believes in Him. Whoever believes in Him is one who does that inwardly or spiritually. They are now motivated by God's invisible Spirit to live godly in this world and then the outward changes start to appear. Their conduct changes. Hopefully they have gone from being, what would you say, just a carnal person to a person who has now begun to behave in a way that mirrors the behavior of Jesus Christ.

They love people. They are kind. They have joy. They are longsuffering with others. And they start showing all the other fruits of the Spirit—all the way to being able to control themselves, which is the last one of those fruits like Bill recently spoke about.

So "whoever believes in Him" is a code phrase, if you will, for the converted person or the true follower of Jesus Christ. He or she has undergone regeneration, a new birth, becoming a new person and now tries to live as Jesus Christ lived in this world.

Let us look a couple of places. One is in Galatians 2:20. This was Doctor Meredith's favorite verse as far as I know. He sure told us it a lot in class years and years ago.

Galatians 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me [that is, by His Spirit]; and the life

which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

Does that not sound like John 3:16? You could call this maybe Paul's commentary or restatement of the same ideas, including what Jesus said essentially to Nicodemus about being born again. He was born again and accepted the sacrifice of Christ and now in baptism, he had died, he was crucified with Christ, and now he lives the life of Christ because when he came up, he lives now because of Christ living in him.

Let us go to I John chapter 5 and see John's recapitulation of this idea in his epistle. Notice the confidence here.

I John 5:18 We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; . . .

He means here that one who is born of God does not practice sin. He may sin occasionally, but it is not habitual anymore. It is something that he does out of weakness.

I John 5:18-19 . . . but he who has been born of God keeps himself [that is, controls himself], and the wicked one does not touch him. We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one.

He is showing here that there is a huge difference between one who has been regenerated, one who has been born again, and the rest of the world. The rest of the world is still being led around by the nose by Satan the Devil—the whole world. But there are some, a few, a little flock that God has called out and given to Jesus as His church, who do not follow the wicked one at all and tries their best not to fall into any of his temptations or be led into sin one way or another.

I John 5:20 And we know [the third verse begins with we know] that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding [That is the spiritual part of *see.*], that we may know Him who is true [just remember the *true* part] and we are in Him who is true; in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.

Another commentary on John 3:16. It is a consistent teaching throughout the apostles' messages—the epistles and the gospels and Acts—that this is what has happened. That there has been a division in mankind, a small percentage, just a little spoonful off the top of the whole world has been called out by God and they have been given access to His Spirit—more than access, Jesus Christ comes and lives in us through His Spirit. And He is preparing that little infinitesimal part of humanity to get to know Him, get to know the Father, and to be different from the world so that when He finally opens up salvation to all humanity, He will have a team to work with who have been through it under the worst of conditions in this world and overcome and proven that they are indeed sons of God.

Let us go back to John 3. We will read verses 9 through 15 again.

John 3:9 Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How could these things be?"

He is being obtuse again, because at this point God had not opened his mind. He is still thinking that he needs to crawl back into his mother's womb, and it is just not sinking in.

John 3:10-13 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? [This is another kind of, "Nicodemus, come on. Think!" That is what my dad used to say to me.] Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man."

What He is doing here by saying this is that He is stating precisely and confidently that He has seen and heard what God told Him in heaven. He is bringing a message directly from the throne of God and that must have knocked Nicodemus' sandals right off his feet. He was telling him here, "I came directly from God." He says, "I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen in heaven and you do not believe our witness.

You do not believe Me. You do not believe the Father. You're off the reservation, Nicodemus. You do not believe what has come directly from the Father's mouth to My ears to tell you." I wonder how he said that. Was Nicodemus by this point, shaking in a puddle of his own sweat? Did he say this with the power of Almighty God? Or was it spoken gently because Nicodemus could not understand? Because he had not been given that gift of the Holy Spirit yet to really understand.

But He is telling him, "Nicodemus, you're thinking like a regular Israelite. You're not thinking like a Christian, like a godly person. You're thinking totally physically and you will not even give Me the time of day to explain these things because you Jewish leaders have already made up your minds." So He says, "I came down from heaven. I'm the Son of Man." Now he gives him a bone.

John 3:14-15 "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up [He is giving him a prophecy here that would take place in however long it was, a year and a half or so.], that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

This is very interesting in terms of Nicodemus. Because Nicodemus was the one who took Him down from that cross. It stuck. And as we understand, Nicodemus was converted.

So in this part here, Nicodemus is told by Jesus that he should know something of this. He and his pals in the Sanhedrin should know something of this because the Old Testament is full of such knowledge. For instance, God cries out in Deuteronomy 5:29 that He wished Israel had a converted heart so that they would fear Him and do His commandments. It was not happening. In Ezekiel 36:25-27, He speaks of sprinkling His people with clean water and giving them a new spirit and a new heart. One of flesh rather than the normal human heart of stone.

But the Jewish leadership did not receive Jesus' testimony of what He had seen and heard in heaven because it did not conform to their physical selfish

preconceptions of what Messiah was going to do. Their botched theology and prophecy blinded them. They were entirely nationalistic, humanistic, work-centered people.

They wanted everything for Israel and hated everybody else. And they thought that that is what God was going to do when He sent the Messiah, that He would put Israel back on the top of all the nations, missing all the spiritual work that is prophesied in the Old Testament.

But like I said, in verse 14, He gives Nicodemus a bone, a biblical example that he could sink his teeth into: the bronze serpent that Moses erected in the wilderness to heal or to save in that sense physically, the Israelites. Just as the Israelites believed that they should be healed or would be healed if they looked at the serpent, so those who looked to Christ and His sacrifice for their sins will be saved from eternal death. They will not perish.

It is a simple type/anti-type that Nicodemus should have been able to figure out. An Old Testament scripture prophesied and foreshadowed the work of Christ, the new birth, the spiritual nature of conversion and belief, and the Kingdom of God being open to everyone, Gentiles included. It is all there but they did not have eyes to see or ears to hear, which He also castigated them for.

Now we get to John 3:16.

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

This is the reason for all of this that Jesus has been saying. This is the reason that He was sent here. And this statement must have blown Nicodemus' mind. This is like the third or fourth time Nicodemus was probably, "What?!" He and his fellows thought God loved only Israel. Did God not say so in Deuteronomy 7:6-8? No, He said He loved Israel, but He did not say that He loved *only* Israel. He does say that they are set apart as holy to Him and they are a special treasure to Him, and He does say elsewhere that He made only Israel His people. But He never says that only Israel has His affection, has His love.

Jesus tells him here that ultimately whoever in the whole cosmos, the whole of humanity, whoever would believe in Him would have the opportunity for salvation. This is why I think it must have blown Nicodemus' mind. He could not believe that every human being would be granted an opportunity at some point for salvation.

But one of the things that Jesus leaves out here in this very simplified statement of His purpose is God's calling. Jesus speaks about God's calling in John 6:44 and 65. We know that one very well, that the Father draws the person to Jesus Christ. Peter mentions it in his Pentecost sermon in Acts 2. I just want to go to a few of these.

Acts 2:39 For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.

Luke brings it up in Acts 13. I will just read that one too.

Acts 13:48 Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.

That is what our calling is, an appointment to eternal life. And of course Peter speaks about this in various places in his epistles. Paul speaks of it a lot.

We remember I Corinthians 1:27: "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty." I do not want to go any further, it would take too much time, but you could just kind of stroll through Paul's epistles and this idea of God's calling comes up fairly frequently.

But it is not mentioned in John 3:16 because it is not necessary for the conversation at the time. Remember, the Bible interprets and clarifies itself. Here a little, there a little, is the principle in Isaiah 28:10.

This means that John 3:16 is *not* saying salvation is open to everybody now and all one must do is believe in Christ. Eventually, yes. But right now, in the historical *now* between Christ's incarnation and His second coming, it is

limited. In this age, God's calling is specific. Personal, not general. The general harvest we know will begin in the Millennium with Israel and those who are living at the time, who come up to the mountain of God to hear His law and His Word.

It will end in the Great White Throne Judgment when everybody will have had an opportunity for salvation. The usual Protestant interpretation of this verse fails to see that Jesus is speaking of the overall plan of God in general terms and does not account for, in this precise formulation of this, for the God-imposed restraints or constraints on His calling and election *now*. That is, until Christ returns and sets up His Kingdom.

Jesus is speaking broadly of God's purpose for all mankind, for all time. You need to go elsewhere in Scripture to see that, right now, things are a little different because He is only calling a few as firstfruits. That will all change after the resurrection of the firstfruits and going into the Millennium.

Now what about this section after, verses 17 through 21, I think we can get this fairly quickly. This is an explanation of the difference between those who believe in Christ and those who do not.

John 3:17-21 "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world [Jesus is the light of the world], and men love darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God."

It is kind of telling to me that nominal Christians do not mention these verses with the same breathless amazement as verse 16. Here, Jesus makes a very precise distinction between those who believe in Him and those who do not.

God sent His Son as a human being to make salvation possible for human beings. His sacrificial death, as well as His teachings and His example, provide what a person needs once God calls him to Jesus Christ. So you have the calling and you have Jesus' instruction; you have His example, and you have the commentary by the apostles that help us to put it all together. And combining this with Jesus Christ's sacrificial death, these are all things that we could not do for ourselves. We could not supply Jesus' example. We could not supply Jesus' teaching. We could not supply His death. And then God's forgiveness and grace and gift of the Holy Spirit. All those things had to be provided for us.

So, what He is saying here in verse 17 is God prepares the way of salvation for us and He is calling these various ones out of the world to have these advantages that He supplies and then work with them.

Verse 18 tells us that because he has believed in Jesus Christ and he has accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Savior. He is no longer under the condemnation of sin. That has been wiped away. Sin has been forgiven. So once a person believes and repents, Christ's sacrifice and God's grace lift the penalty. Now he is living freely for the first time in his life with the help of God's Spirit in him, plus all the instruction plus Jesus' example to live the right way, to be like Christ.

But the unbeliever, on the other hand, remains condemned. He does not have access to the forgiveness of God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ because he does not believe in the Son. He has not been called. He has not been regenerated through God's calling and the gift of the Holy Spirit and so he is exactly what he once was. Under condemnation.

Verses 19 and 20 are the crux of the matter in terms of the difference between the two groups. The unbeliever keeps on practicing evil. That is, he lives a life of habitual sin.

I will just read Romans 8:8 quickly here. It says, "So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God." They are still sinning. There is no way you are going to please God through sin.

You might want to write down also I John 3:4-10, where the apostle John says something very similar. So in that sinful state that he is still in, he cannot come to the light. Remember, I said you cannot seek God in the normal human state. You cannot come to the light. You cannot come to Jesus unless you are drawn by the Father (John 6:44). His darkness has nothing in common with the light of truth.

So there is no meeting of the minds. There can be no conversion there until God acts. And really, frankly, that person really does not want to because he does not want his sinful state to be revealed by the truth. He would rather wallow in his sins than have to face the glaring light of the truth that would show his sinfulness, his wickedness. Because really, an uncalled person's guilt is measureless. I mean, we are such sinful human beings, we think we are good. But we are not. And then God slowly adjusts the lighting so we can see and we realize, even if we have been trying to live God's way, we have been doing a horrible job of it. We do not measure up at all.

Verse 21, then, gives the other side of this. The believer, on the other hand, practices, does, He says, or accomplishes or observes the truth in his life because he wants to please God. This is the change that takes place that people can see later on because before he did not want to do anything that God wanted him to do.

Once he has called and given the Holy Spirit and he starts learning and growing, he wants to go to the light. He wants to do what is right. He wants to please God. He wants to make a good witness for God. He wants to grow into the fullness of the light. He wants to be like Jesus Christ. He wants to be right next to and doing all the things that the Light of the world does. While the unbeliever runs from the light, taking comfort in the darkness, the believer is continually drawn further into the light, basks in the light, and wants to reflect it in everything he does and says and thinks.

That is the difference between these two. The unbeliever and the true believer are polar opposites. One runs *to* Christ, the other runs *from* Christ.

Let us conclude. I want to go to Romans 5 and I want you to hear, just sit back and listen to Paul's explanation of John 3:16. I am going to be running through this chapter and a little bit into the next, but I think it makes a good point here. So I will start in verse 1.

Let us just understand that Paul comes at this from the idea of justification by faith, you know, through grace rather than the way Jesus did, but I think seeing it from his point of view helps us to understand what Jesus was saying.

Romans 5:1-2 Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we also have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God [that we will have eternal life].

Romans 5:5-11 Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. [The result of the calling of God is the giving of the Holy Spirit.] For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.

Let us go down to chapter 6, verse 4.

Romans 6:4 Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

Romans 6:8-14 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

Let us skip down to verse 20 now.

Romans 6:20-23 For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. [They will perish.] But now having been set free from sin and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness [or sanctification], and the end, everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.