

John 3:1-21 - January 25, 2026

It is tempting to focus on the verse, *“For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son so that anyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* This is often referred to as the world’s most famous bible verse. But, it is important to remember that the single verse, or any other verse, is not canonical in and of itself. Rather it is part of the story of Nicodemus, which itself is part of the Gospel of John, which itself is part of the New Testament, which is itself part of the Christian Bible. So the best place to start is not just this verse, but also this passage, and to put it into its narrative context.

At this point, we are relatively early into John’s story. After being heralded by John the Baptist, Jesus has done two things. First he turned water into wine in what appears to be an impromptu miracle, or according to John’s gospel. a SIGN of God’s activity in the world as well as the disclosure of the identity and purpose of Jesus. In this case, Jesus enacts the superabundance of God’s grace, providing a vast quantity of the exceptional wine when the banquet has run dry. John had foreshadowed this in his prologue by telling us that through Jesus “we have all received grace upon grace.”

The second thing that Jesus does, at first seems to be altogether different. Instead of continuing his ministry with another sign of abundance, Jesus enters the Temple just before Passover and drives out the money changers and the merchants selling sacrifices. But, while this may contrast in tenor and character with changing water into wine, Jesus’ overturning the marketplace tables flows from the same reality.

Because God has bestowed the fullness of God's grace onto the world through the Son, the one John heralded as "the lamb of God to take away the sin of the world," there is simply NO need for any other sacrifice. The act of selling and buying sacrificial animals fails to understand what God is up to and risks missing the unique and decisive activity of God in Jesus.

But, these aren't the only two things Jesus does, just the only two John describes in any detail, as he tells us that Jesus stayed in Jerusalem during the Passover and did many other signs and that these signs caused many to believe him. It's in this context, that Nicodemus comes to see Jesus. Nicodemus had heard enough about what Jesus was up to in Jerusalem to make him think he ought to pay him a visit and find out more.

Now John is a master of dramatic settings, symbolism and imagery, so it is important to note that Nicodemus, a Pharisee and Jewish leader, arrives at night, a time of unbelief, ignorance, and temptation. Apparently, he comes to learn more about this young rabbi, but perhaps does not want his colleagues to know of his interest. He has, if not faith, at least faithful curiosity. So, as a VIP with a big theological reputation to uphold, he decided that the darkness of the night would be the preferred time to examine this Jesus. Better to be safe than sorry, he thought, as he waited until his neighbours were all asleep.

Nicodemus is identified as a "pharisee." In the time of Jesus, about two-thirds of the Sanhedrin was Sadducee, not Pharisee. By the time John's gospel was written, about sixty years later, the Sadducees no longer existed and only the Pharisees made up the ruling religious council.

If there were to be support for this Jesus in the Sanhedrin, it would not be surprising that the support would come from a Pharisee member. Jesus had much more in common with the Pharisees than with the upper-class Sadducees. Some Pharisees were genuinely torn between the people-based but risky Jesus movement and the corrupt but safer Status Quo.

So, Nicodemus is very curious about Jesus. Little wonder. Jesus has caused quite a stir. His actions in the Temple would have been unheard of, yet his signs and wonders, as Nicodemus confesses, testify that he has come from God, and so Nicodemus comes to question Jesus to learn more about him and to make some decision about him.

At the start of their nocturnal interview, Jesus was rather patient with Nicodemus. What it all boiled down to, Jesus told him, was that unless you were born again, you might as well give up. That was all very well, Nicodemus says, but just how were you supposed to pull off a thing like that? How were you supposed to pull it off if you were pushing sixty-five? How did you get born again when it was a challenge just to get out of bed in the morning? He even got a little sarcastic. Could one “enter a second time into the mother’s womb?” he asked. Nicodemus is unable to think beyond established categories. Having already exited the womb, he wonders how it is possible for a person to have another birth. He knows of “old birth” but not “new birth.” Nicodemus appears rather wooden in this thinking, but manages to ask the obvious question, which was: How? Assuming that what you say is desirable, and assuming further that it is possible, how do you do it?

A gust of wind happened to whistle down the chimney at that point, making the dying embers burst into flame, and Jesus said being born again was like that. It wasn't something you DID. The wind did it. The Spirit did it. It was something that happened, for God's sake.

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. Nicodemus came thinking he knew what God was doing by virtue of what he saw in the signs. Jesus is pointing to a vastly deeper, invisible movement of God. He is inviting the old man to enter into the mystery of this new birth. This is an invitation that Nicodemus would eventually respond to, but for now his world is spinning. Jesus has pulled the rug out from under his old orthodoxy. All he can do is mutter, "How can this be?"

Jesus is focussing on Nicodemus addressing him as "Teacher of Israel," a technical term for a Pharisee. You can feel Jesus' frustration. He has spoken and testified but Nicodemus refused to accept it. He has spoken in terms of wind and water and birth, earthly images meant to make the truth clear.

At this point John's tone shifts to a sermon or explanation. Before Jesus can ascend to heaven, he must be "lifted up," a metaphor for crucifixion. John reminds them of Moses as the Israelites, during their escape from Egypt, once again began to grumble. They spoke against God and Moses complaining about the manna, it tasted terrible. In response God sent venomous serpents into the camp. Many were bitten and died as a result. Acknowledging their sin and repenting, the serpents were taken away. God told Moses to make an image of a serpent and place it on a pole, telling the people that all who looked at the serpent would be healed. This image had been burned into the collective memory of Israel.

Just as Moses had “lifted up” the serpent in the same way the Son of Man will be lifted up, in the crucifixion.

John’s Ephesian readers would have had a different image in their imaginations when they heard of the serpent on a pole. In the heart of the city of Ephesus was the temple to Aselepius, the God of healing. His symbol was a staff with a serpent wrapped around it. At night the sick were brought in and left sleeping on the floor. In the morning they would report their dreams to the priest who would then prescribe a cure, which usually included a trip to one of the local bath houses. Again we see the connection to water and healing.

John’s first listeners would have understood once more that the power for true healing was being reclaimed exclusively by Jesus. It was for love that God gave his Son. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, and the serpent experience, whoever believes in the Son will not perish but will live forever. The bite of the serpent will lose its power as we look to Jesus “lifted up” on the cross.

Near the end we read: “This, then, is the judgment” or “This is the verdict.” John will reach all the way back to the prologue and the image of the misunderstood light, summing up everything to the discussion of the new birth. Nicodemus is still undecided. So far in John’s story he is the exemplar of the one who lives by the truth and comes into the light.

Apparently, Jesus is speaking on behalf of the church – or perhaps the Johannine community – to those who are intrigued with the movement, but as yet unwilling to join. For them, Nicodemus is a representative figure.

Jesus said, “I’m telling you God is so in love with this world, that he sent me down, so if you don’t believe your own eyes, then maybe you’ll believe mine, maybe you’ll believe me, maybe you won’t come sneaking around scared half to death in the dark anymore, but will come to, come clean, come into the light, come to LIFE.

What impressed Nicodemus even more than the speech was the quickening of his own breathing and the pounding of his own heart. He hadn’t felt like that since his first kiss, since the time his first child was born. John’s story plays out in many ways as a series of encounters between Jesus and various characters in the story, each of whom is called to make a decision about Jesus.

So what did Nicodemus decide? As is typical in John, whoever may come to him, whether male or female, peasant, beggar, or Pharisee, Jesus soon takes over the conversation. In this case, after Nicodemus’ acclamation that he must be from God, Jesus declares that no one not born from above (or anew) can see God.

At the close of the story of Nicodemus, we notice something odd: Nicodemus has disappeared. It’s similar to the close of a movie scene where the screen fades to black as we listen to the narrator continue to speak. So also here, as Nicodemus the pharisee and leader fades away, presumably back to where he came from, decided or undecided about Jesus, we do not know, and all we are left with are Jesus’ words, words that echo the two previous scenes: Jesus comes bearing the super-abundance of grace upon grace and his very presence demands our attention and allegiance.

The scene and pattern is replayed countless times in our lives and never more explicitly than on Sunday morning. We too, are offered the super-abundance of the Word-made-flesh as we see and hear and taste, the grace upon grace that is lavished upon us in Word and Sacrament.

And then comes the word of decision: how will we respond? Jesus' claim on us is all-encompassing. We either seek our source of goodness, grace, and security from him – or we seek it elsewhere. And as we leave the sanctuary we will be offered countless other options – status, power, possessions, and more – that similarly promise us life and require our allegiance in return.

In John, it's not quite a decision as much as it is a REACTION. Jesus' presence seems to reveal the character of those he encounters more than simply the posing of a question. As Jesus says, God's judgment has already been rendered; **FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD...**

This is the first and last word of this Gospel as well as the whole Christian story. We are NOT offered an option;

“WOULD YOU LIKE TO RECEIVE GOD’S LOVE AND GRACE?”

as it is to declare to us God's judgment and decision:

“GOD LOVES YOU AND ALL THE WORLD”

and step back to see what happens. And sometimes that simply takes patience.

While Nicodemus fades from the scene without disclosing to us the intentions or decisions of his heart, he does return, much later in the story, to make a public affirmation of his faith in Jesus through his actions – for he and Joseph of Arimathea take Jesus' body down from

the cross and bury it in a tomb owned by Joseph. Later on, he went with Joseph to pay his last respects at the tomb not in the dark of the night, but in broad daylight. It was a crazy thing to do, what with the witch-hunt that was going on, but he decided it was more than worth it. When he heard the next day that some of the disciples had seen Jesus alive again, he wept like a newborn child.

Jesus' message and call is urgent and clear. Sometimes we respond in earnest and at other times it may take us much longer to respond. But respond we will, guided by the Holy Spirit that brings us new birth and life. Why? Because God loves the world so much, including us.

We bring children to the baptismal font before they can offer their consent and simply immerse them in God's love. How offensive, some might say, that we do not wait until they are "of age" and can decide for themselves. But that's the heart of infant Baptism. God just plain adopts us, makes us God's own, and pledges to be both with us and for us forever. All this whether we are ready, interested, or eager to receive it or not.

The same is true with us. If God makes God's great love for the world and us conditional, then we, suddenly, have tremendous power. We can negotiate. We can threaten to reject God's love. We can even tell God to take a hike if we don't care for God's terms. But when God just loves us, completely and unconditionally, and when God just goes and dies for us, well then the jig is up. There's just nothing we can do to influence God. God in Jesus has made God's decision, and it is FOR us. Yes, we can run. But, we can't change the fact that God loves us, that God loves the whole world more than we can imagine.

This is good news. The best news, but first it's hard. Hard because we're not in control. Hard because it's not up to us. Hard because every time we hear how much God loves us, we also know that we had nothing to do with it, cannot influence it, and therefore are not in control.

And, precisely because we are NOT in control of this relationship, that is, this is a relationship established wholly by God, we realize it is the one relationship we can't blow. This relationship is available to all and every single child of God, no matter who they are, no matter what they do, no matter what they believe. God has taken responsibility for this one.

Does that mean we have nothing to do, nothing to contribute to this most important relationship? Definitely not! Once we have been loved this fully, this completely, we can respond in love, honouring God and sharing the news of God's love for the world with all we meet and all that we do. There's plenty to do. Be we are now messengers, we are witnesses to what God has done for us. We are not decision makers or judges, we do not call the shots.

God does not ask the world if it wishes to be the recipient of God's love. God just goes ahead and loves, and not only loves, but gives the world God's only beloved Son over to death. The one who dies for you clearly has a significant claim on you, and John makes that clear. God's love, surprising, all-encompassing, unasked for and undeserved, is also given unconditionally.

God loves us, whether we like it or not. In the face of that kind of love,

we will likely either yield to God's love or we will run away screaming, for no one can remain neutral to such extravagance.

Either way, God's judgment is revealed. God loves this world, even the God-hating world that crucified Christ. By the gift of the untamed Spirit, in Jesus' cross, we perceive God's redemptive act and in this way are drawn into fellowship with all who dare believe in Jesus and the whole world that God loves so very much.

Amen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Birthing God, You gave us new life when we were born of water and Spirit. Help us live into that new life, refreshed and renewed for your work.

Amen