

## God Loves Us

*Because God loves each one of us, God has made it possible for us to live with Him forever.*

.....**John 3: 3 – 17**.....

***<sup>3</sup>Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. <sup>2</sup> He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." <sup>3</sup> Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." <sup>4</sup> "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. <sup>6</sup> Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. <sup>7</sup> You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' <sup>8</sup> The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." <sup>9</sup> "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. <sup>10</sup> "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? <sup>11</sup> Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. <sup>12</sup> I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up <sup>15</sup> that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him." <sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."***.....

The Good News of Christmas is that God Loves Us! Jesus told Nicodemus just how much God loves the world, and the people in it. Jesus told him, ***'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.'***

Now Nicodemus was a reasonable man. He had seen all the amazing miracles that Jesus had done, and he had heard Jesus speak with other-worldly wisdom. When Nicodemus saw Jesus in Jerusalem during Passover, he thought it was the perfect opportunity to have a little one-on-one conversation with Jesus about his connection with God.

The things Jesus told Nicodemus were very confusing because they were not at all what Nicodemus' faith had taught him. For one thing, the entrance requirements for the Kingdom of Heaven were not at all what Nicodemus expected. Nicodemus thought that he was *'in.'* He thought that his Jewish ancestry and his impeccable rule-keeping was all he needed to be admitted. What Jesus said shocked him.

***'No one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again.'*** 'Born again?' How is this even possible? Jesus' explanation didn't exactly clear things up for Nicodemus. Jesus told him, ***'No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.'***

The Kingdom Jesus described was not an earthly Kingdom. It was not a political power. It was not a geographical empire. As Jesus pictured it, God's Kingdom exists wherever God's Spirit takes up residence and is at work transforming a human heart and soul.

The door to God's Kingdom is opened to anyone who recognizes their sin and repents, relying on Jesus' gift of forgiveness. The repenting of sin in the waters of baptism is the entry point. When a person receives Jesus as their Redeemer and Savior, and asks Jesus to be Lord of their lives, Jesus sends the Holy Spirit into each believer, and the Kingdom takes root.

The new '*birth*' is a spiritual one, not physical. The Holy Spirit changes our attitudes, our perspectives, so that our goals become God-oriented, instead of self-focused. God's Kingdom isn't just a future destination, but a present reality, in which God dwells with us, and we with Him, right here and now.

We are '*reborn*' into the Kingdom of God through the water of baptism and the work of God's Holy Spirit in us. First Peter 1:23 puts it this way: '***For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.***'

The condition we inherit by virtue of our human birth causes us to be separated from God. Every single person ever born originated from the '*seed*' of Adam and Eve, which Paul describes in Romans 5:12: '***...sin entered the world through one man (Adam), ... and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.***'

Augustine, in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, called this problem, '*Original Sin.*'<sup>1</sup> It is a condition that we cannot, on our own, escape. We need God's help. Try as we might, none of us are able to heal ourselves from this disease.

In Romans 3: 23, Paul put it this way, '***For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.***' The level of holiness required to enter into the Kingdom of God is so far above what we can accomplish through our own efforts.

But then comes the ***Good News***. In order that we *can* live with God forever, and be citizens of His Kingdom, God took drastic action. God sent Jesus to us so that we can be set free from sin's terrible power. Jesus' mission was to become human like us and live a sinless life on our behalf, and then, by taking the consequences of our sin upon himself on the cross, Jesus is able to cover our sin with his own holiness.

God '***sent His one and only Son***' as a gift to us, so that we could acquire the level of '*righteousness*' needed to belong to God and to His Kingdom. Jesus came from Heaven to open our eyes to the reality of our '*lostness*' and to show us the way to God.

The graciousness of God is such that God doesn't insist that we make ourselves '*good*' in order for Him to love us. He loves us in our most miserable condition. God doesn't insist that we '*earn*' His love, either. God just loves you and me, regardless of how loveable or un-lovable we are. Paul, in *Romans 5:8* wrote, '***God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.***'

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Original\\_sin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Original_sin)  
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Over and over again in the Bible, we hear of God's great love for us. The Hebrews called it *'hesed'* (*kheh-sed*); a merciful, patient, and faithful kind of love. Jesus told Nicodemus that God *'loved'* everyone in the world with this kind of love. John used the Greek word, *'agapao'* (*ah-gah-PAH-oh*), to describe how God loves every single person on the earth with a forgiving and undeserved kind of love.

This kind of love God has for us is **'Unconditional.'** *'Unconditional'* means that God loves us despite the messiness of our sin. *'Unconditional'* means that God loves us just as we are. In His love, God welcomes us to join Him, no matter how stained or ragged we are. However, God gives us the *'free will'* to decide if we want to allow Him to *'clean us up.'* God wants us to choose to return His love; God doesn't force anyone to love Him back.

But if we do want to belong to God, God has made it possible through His Son, Jesus. Through Jesus, God has made a Covenant with us that will release us from the grip of sin and make us members of God's eternal family and citizens of His Kingdom.

This Covenant is the one that Jesus made on the cross when he died for our sins. Every time we celebrate The Lord's Supper, we give thanks to God for healing us by the *'bread'* of Jesus' broken body and by the blood Jesus shed for the redemption of our sin.

Jesus' covenant is **'Conditional'**, however. Jesus' Covenant is only effective if a person accepts it. In order to do that, each of us must recognize the seriousness of our sin and receive Jesus' forgiveness.

As John Calvin, our Presbyterian forefather said, *'... as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us.'*<sup>2</sup> Painting a beautiful word-picture, Calvin said, we must *'put on Christ'* (Galatians 3:27), and *'be grafted into him'* (Romans 11:17), in order to *'enjoy Christ and all his benefits.'*<sup>3</sup>

I know you've heard me say all of this before. I keep trying to say it in different ways because I want to make sure that you have heard the Gospel message clearly and don't confuse it like Nicodemus did.

We become Christians when we admit our need for a Savior and accept Jesus' offer in his New Covenant. We don't become a Christian because we were raised in a Christian home, or because we do *'good'* things, like help our neighbors or treat people kindly. (Even though those things are very wonderful.) Attending church and doing *'church'* things doesn't make a person a Christian.

We become a Christian only when we ask Jesus to save us from our sin and allow him to take charge of our life. We become a Christian by repenting of our sinful nature and by allowing the Holy Spirit to transform our human nature into a reflection of God's holy nature.

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. 1*, ed. John T. McNeill, transl. Ford Lewis Battles (Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), III.1.1., p. 537.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

That night, Jesus told Nicodemus that God had made him a remedy for the fatal consequences of sin. Jesus compared himself to the cure God sent to Israel when the people were dying in the desert of poisonous snake bites.

At that time, God told Moses to make a bronze replica of the deadly snakes and put it on a pole so that anyone who looked on the snake would be healed. (*Numbers 21: 4 - 9*) A replica of Moses' snake on a pole stands today on Mt. Nebo overlooking the Negev Desert.

God has done the same for us in Jesus. Jesus was raised on the cross as remedy for our sin. Anyone who looks to Jesus for the forgiveness of their sin will also be saved and receive eternal life. (*Titus 3:5*)

Just imagine for a moment that your doctor told you that you were very, very ill. While you were trying to process all of this very grave news, the doctor also gave you some good news! The doctor said to you, '*You are very sick, but there is a cure. All you have to do is take this medicine. And then you will be healed.*'

The choice would then be yours to make. You could choose to take the medicine or not. Even if the medicine was expensive to make, but free for you to take, wouldn't you say 'Yes!' and 'Thank you!?' If the only side effect was that you would become whole and healthy and live as God created you to live, wouldn't you do it? I'd like to think that you would.

That is what Jesus' cross is for us. His death on the cross is just the medicine we need for our fatal conditional of sin-sickness. The cure is free to us; but it was very costly to Jesus. God's healing is ours to accept or reject.

Many people today think that because God loves us that He won't let anyone spend eternity separated from Him. The Bible tells us that one day, each of us will stand before the judgment throne of God. Those who think they will be OK because God will judge them on a 'curve' will realize too late that it doesn't matter how many people are 'better' or 'worse' than they are. The degree of God's holiness is something far greater than anything we humans can conceive of. The Bible tells us that even the 'best' of us fall far short of the entrance requirements of the Kingdom. (*Romans 3:23*)

Those of us who receive Jesus' gift of forgiveness, will not be afraid when we stand before God, because Jesus has given us his own 'robe' of holiness to wear. Our sins will be covered and made clean. Through faith in Jesus, we will confidently know that we do have a place in God's Kingdom.

Jesus was born to show us the magnitude of God's love for us. God loved us enough to come to us in the person of His Son; to stoop to our level, and then to suffer and die for us.

Make sure this Christmas to take in the breadth and depth of God's love for you. (*Ephesians 3:18*) Take time to remember what the birth of Jesus means for the world and for you. Realize how much God loves you; how precious and valuable you are to Him.

And above all, be sure to use the gift that God has so graciously provided. Amen.