

A Real and Radical Transformation**John 3:1-17**

Sometimes when we ask David to do something, he will get this puzzled look on his face and then say “I don’t understand” meaning he wants us to explain it better or differently so he can get it. As he continues in school we have told him that if there is something he does not understand he should talk to his teacher to get clarification.

That’s what’s happening in our passage today. This is the last message in our series on God’s provision. We have followed some Old and New Testament examples to see how God provided in different situations and in different ways to show that He is all powerful and provides what we need. Today we will see that God provides the ultimate gift.

Turn in your Bibles to **John 3:1-17** this morning.

Cutting through the maze – v. 1-3

Carefully answering a misconception – v. 4-15

Choosing to believe the message – v. 16-17

I. CUTTING THROUGH THE MAZE – v. 1-3**A. A Cautious Reflection – v. 1-2**

It had been a long day for Jesus. Most days were like that. Traveling from village to village walking, talking, teaching, preaching, healing, attending to gathering crowds. There was a constant demand on His time and talent. Can you do this? What about that? I have a question. Hear me, help me, heal me.

Jesus was early in His ministry but already His reputation was getting around. There were those who were excited to see Him and those who were exasperated by Him. Those were mostly made up the Pharisees. But not all of them had a growing disdain for Him. There was this man named Nicodemus who Himself was a Pharisee. That’s the religious elite. As a Pharisee, he represented the

best of Israel in terms of their religious zeal for spiritual matters. That he was a Pharisee meant he was educated and articulate in religious matters. He was supposed to know the Old Testament inside and out and then live by it. He would have lived by the strictest religious code. **Warren Wiersbe says “He was a man of high moral character, deep religious hunger and yet profound spiritual blindness.”**

We also read that he was part of the ruling council of the Jews. That meant he was one of the Sanhedrin. They were a group of 70 men who were given the responsibility for religious decisions. It would be similar in nature to our Supreme Court. They also had the authority by Rome to enact civil rule. He had both religious and political clout.

We read that he came to Jesus by night. There are those who say he came at night because he was afraid of what the other Pharisees would say if they saw him conferring with Jesus. That is a plausible argument. Although we could also argue that Jesus was early in his ministry and hadn’t really begun to chastise them for their blatant hypocrisy.

The other thing to consider in this whole matter is that he uses the pronoun “we” insinuating that there were others who shared the same thoughts as Nicodemus about Jesus and he was their representative. If there was fear of what the entire group would think then it was better to send a lone spokesman.

Others suggest something that is perhaps a better explanation. Jesus was so busy during the day with ministering to people and there was always a crowd around Him it seemed best to meet with Jesus at a time when they would not be interrupted.

Whatever the reason for this night time visit we are unsure, but one thing is for sure as the story of Jesus unfolds in the Gospels. When he came should not be our concern, that he came should. We know that at one point Nicodemus stood up for Jesus against

the Pharisees and then later he boldly proclaimed his allegiance to Jesus when he and Joseph of Arimathea took the body of Jesus after the crucifixion to bury Him.

But on this particular night as they meet he is unclear about the true identity of Jesus. He begins their discussion by putting himself on equal grounds with Jesus by calling Him “Rabbi.” In a sense he was saying that they were both teachers talking Rabbi to Rabbi, but he further qualified something about Jesus by saying that they knew He came from God by all the signs He performed. Nicodemus was willing to say that Jesus came from God, perhaps in the same way the Old Testament prophets were sent by God, but he was not willing to say that Jesus was God even with his admission about all the miracles.

Jesus interrupted him by cutting through the cautious reflection with a careful response.

B. A Careful Response – v. 3

Jesus was saying that if Nicodemus really thought He was from God, he and everyone else wouldn’t be able to see God unless they were born again.

That term born again literally means born from above and refers to having a spiritual transformation. In a word, it’s regeneration or salvation. It is the act of God giving eternal life to those who are dead in sin. That it comes from above means that only God can give it.

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

It is not by our efforts but only by God through the work of His Holy Spirit in us that we are born again.

I think **II Corinthians 5:17** says it best:

“Therefore if any man be in Christ he is a new creation...” That can only happen by being born again. Only then can we enter the kingdom of God.

As a Pharisee he would have been taught and would have thought that entering the kingdom of God was possible by being born a Jew and by keeping the Law. Jesus was saying that no one can enter the kingdom of God except through a radically new way – birth that is from above. Being a Jew or even a religious Jew merits nothing with God.

I just finished reading a book by Ravi Zacharias titled *Why Jesus?* in which he unwraps a mass marketed spirituality prevalent in the western world that in essence reshapes eastern religious thought into a belief system that says we’re all good enough to eventually get into heaven. Folks, I’m here to tell you on the authority of God’s Word that there is only one way and that there has always only been one way to enter heaven. You must be born again. It wasn’t something new that Jesus taught. It was taught when God made the very first sacrifice after Adam and Even sinned and explained the need for a Redeemer who would come.

In a nutshell, Jesus was telling Nicodemus that you can’t get to heaven on the efforts of the flesh to live religiously, you must be born again. Being a Jew and being religious weren’t enough and neither are our man made attempts. They cannot produce the kind of radical transformation that is required to enter heaven.

If I really wanted to go to the Tiger’s playoff game and spent hours and hours manufacturing the very best ticket I could make on my computer, the usher would see it was fake and deny me entrance. I can only get in with a genuine ticket. (By the way, does anyone have a ticket they aren’t going to use?)

Jesus gave a careful response. He cut through the maze of Nicodemus’ polite introduction to get to the

real heart of the matter. Then He carefully answered a misconception.

II. CAREFULLY ANSWERING A MISCONCEPTION – v. 4-15

A. A Skeptical Question – v. 4

You would think that an educated and religious man like Nicodemus would have understood what Jesus was referring to.

“Come on, Jesus, don’t be ridiculous. As an adult I can’t go back inside my mother’s womb and be born again. That’s absurd.”

His question showed that even though he was a religious leader well versed in the Old Testament he really didn’t understand regeneration even though any Gentile wishing to become a Jewish proselyte had to go through what they deemed a regeneration process.

I can get a passport and go to Japan, I can even change my citizenship to become a citizen and learn their language, but it will still be abundantly clear that I am not Japanese. To truly be Japanese I need to be born there.

Jesus responded by saying it doesn’t come from a physical rebirth but by a supernatural rebirth or transformation.

B. A Supernatural Transformation – v. 5-8

Jesus is not saying that a person must be born first through the physical process by experiencing the amniotic fluid of the mother’s womb and then is born through the Spirit. And neither is Jesus talking about water baptism as some suggest. There is no evolution from the flesh to the Spirit.

It was something that Nicodemus should have been familiar with in his Old Testament studies.

Ezekiel 36:24-27

There are a number of Old Testament passages which speak about this ritual of water cleansing that would be symbolic of the cleansing that comes through God when His Spirit makes us new, when His Spirit regenerates us.

It is not a little touch up work, it is a complete renovation.

It is not a tuning up, it is an overhaul.

It is not adding a little makeup, it is a complete makeover.

It is not a little decorating, it is a complete remodeling.

It is not making a few minor changes in our lives, Jesus wants to turn our lives upside down, make a radical change, a change that makes us fit to enter heaven. No one can enter heaven without this spiritual washing of the soul that comes through the work of God’s Spirit. **Titus 3:5** says it comes through God’s Spirit. **Ephesians 5:26** says it comes through the Word of God.

Jesus says that the flesh can only produce flesh. The flesh cannot produce what is spiritual that can only come from God. And while that supernatural transformation takes place instantly the moment we believe in Christ as our Savior, the transformation on the outside will take place in the future when we see Christ.

I John 3:2 “Dearly beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He shall appear, we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is.”

(I Corinthians 15:51-53)

How does this supernatural (spiritual) transformation take place?

C. A Straightforward Salvation – v. 9-15

Jesus uses a familiar story with Nicodemus from the Old Testament. Because of the disobedience of Israel God sent venomous snakes in judgment.

Many died, but many cried out to Moses for intervention. God had him craft a snake and place it on a pole that anyone who believed could look to the pole and be healed. It provided physical healing, but the point is the same.

Jesus was telling Nicodemus that if he wanted to go to heaven, he had to believe that He, the Son of Man, would be lifted up to die on the cross, by believing he would be saved. It wasn't through being a Jew. It wasn't through keeping the law or being religious. It will only happen if you believe in Jesus. Only then will you have eternal life.

And notice carefully in verse 15 the word everyone. Everyone say "everyone." Jesus was saying that heaven was for anyone and everyone who believes, not just Jews and not just the religious.

It's for you.

It's for me.

It's for your neighbor and your cousin.

It's for the town drunk and the class bully.

It's for the mass murderer and the pedophile.

It's for the homosexual and the heroin addict.

It's for all who call on His name in belief and at that moment a radical, spiritual transformation will take place that fits him or her and you and me for heaven.

But there is something each of us must do. We see it in **verse 15** and also in **verses 16-17**. We must choose to believe the message.

III. CHOOSING TO BELIEVE THE MESSAGE – v. 16-17

A. God's Passion – "For God so loved."

Too many people can't see past the God of the Old Testament. They only see His vengeance, jealousy and wrath. They miss that He said He has loved us with an everlasting love. He loves us not because we are worthy or we have some value or merit worth His notice. He loved us in spite of ourselves.

He loved us before we were even born, even before the universe existed.

He loves me in spite of my sin, but loves me too much to leave me there. He is passionate about us. That ought to say something to us about how much He values us.

B. God's Perspective – "the world"

The depth of His passion is that He loves everyone equally. The degree of His perspective is that it encompasses everyone. He loves the Palestinian and the Peruvian. He loves the Mexican and the Moroccan. He loves the Canadian and the Cambodian. He loves the Muslim Jihadist and the militant Jordanian. God's love is enough for the world.

How do we know He loves the world? Notice God's provision and God's present.

C. God's Provision – "He gave"

D. God's Present – "His one and only Son"

Understand that when He gave, it was a gift that expected nothing in return. Even if no one had accepted His gift, He still would have given it, because of His love. He loves us as we are but He loves us too much to leave us there, so He gave a provision that would bring about a regeneration in us, so that we could become born again. He gave the best gift possible, His one and only Son. He did not send an angel. That would have been inadequate to bring about the necessary spiritual transformation that is required to enter heaven. It could only come through the sending of His Son. But it was not enough for Him just to come to earth, He also had to die and in His death He bore our sin so that in our believing we could become transformed, made new, born again.

E. God's Power – "whoever believes in Him shall not perish."

To believe is to be persuaded, to trust, to place in confidence, to have reliance on. Belief is personal, individual. My belief cannot be shared by you or vice versa. It is an individual faith that saves, but God's love in sending His Son to die is sufficient for anyone who believes and in believing he and she will not perish.

Perish means destruction or ruin, but not annihilation. For those who do not believe there awaits an eternal ruin. **John 5:24** says that those who do not believe will be condemned. **I John 5:11** says that if you have the Son you have life and if you don't have the Son you don't have life. It is in God's power to save those from perishing because they believe in Jesus who died for them.

F. God's Promise – "have eternal life"

John 6:40, 47 "For My Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day...I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life."

Eternal life is not an ongoing continuation of time but to exist above or outside of time. It is forever. That is the promise that God gives to us, because He has the power to do so. It is a promise that He will not revoke. He will not change His mind.

G. His Purpose – "to save the world" v. 17

God's purpose is not to condemn us; otherwise we would have already been condemned and been found guilty and the penalty would be that we would perish. But there is good news today and every day.

II Peter 3:9 "The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

That sounds like He loves us an awful lot. He

wants us to be saved. He doesn't want us to perish.

I like what Jack Hayford once said, "God thought us worth saving."

I want to close with *The Donut Story*.

There was a certain professor of religion named Dr. Christianson, who taught a course on Christianity at a small college. Every student was required to take this course regardless of his or her major. Although he tried to communicate the essence of the Gospel in his class, most of his students looked on the course as nothing more than required drudgery. Despite his best efforts, most students refused to take Christianity seriously.

One year he had a special student named Steve. Steve was only a freshman, but was studying with the intent to go on to seminary. He was popular and an imposing physical specimen as the starting center on the school football team and a strong Christian.

One day the professor asked Steve to stay after class to talk with him. He asked Steve how many pushups he could do. Steve said he did 200 pushups every night. The professor said that was pretty good, but asked if he thought he could do 300. Steve said he didn't know because he had never done 300 pushups at one time, but said he would try.

The professor then asked if he could do them in sets of 10 and explained a class project that would require him to do 300 push-ups for the project to work, but Steve had to assure the professor that he could do it.

Friday came and Steve got to class early and sat in the front of the room. When the class started the professor pulled out a big box of donuts. Now these weren't the normal kind of donuts, these were the big fancy kind with cream centers and frosting swirls. The class thought that being Friday they

were going to get a head start on the weekend with a party in Dr. Christianson's class.

The professor went to the first girl in the first row and asked her if she would like a donut. She said she would. He then turned to Steve and asked him if he would please do 10 push-ups so that she could have a donut. Steve said he would and jumped down and did 10 push-ups.

The professor went to the next student and asked if would like a donut. He said yes. The professor asked Steve if he would do 10 push-ups for that student's donut. Steve got down and did the 10 push-ups. And so it went on down the first aisle. Steve did 10 push-ups for each student before he or she received a donut.

Dr. Christianson continued down the second aisle until he came to Scott. Scott was on the basketball team and like Steve was in good physical condition. When the professor asked if he would like a donut, Scott said he would like to do his own push-ups. Dr. Christianson said that wasn't possible because Steve had to do them. Scott then said he didn't want one. The professor shrugged and then turned to Steve and asked if he would do 10 push-ups so Scott could have the donut he didn't want. Steve started to do the push-ups, but Scott yelled at the professor that he didn't want one.

The professor looked at Scott and sternly said this was his class, his desks, and his donuts. If he didn't want the donut, he could just leave it on the desk and Dr. Christianson placed the donut down.

Steve was starting to slow down a little from all the effort as Dr. Christianson started down the third row. By this time many students began to get angry. Dr. Christianson asked if the next student wanted a donut. She said she did not want one. The professor asked Steve if he would 10 push-ups so she could have a donut she did not want. He did 10 and she got a donut.

Uneasiness began to fill the room. More students were saying no, but more push-ups were done anyways with donuts being left on desks. It was also requiring more effort on Steve's part to get those push-ups done for each donut. He was sweating profusely and his face and arms were turning red because of the physical effort.

By this point it became difficult for even the professor to watch the effort Steve made in doing all the push-ups so he asked Robert, the most vocal unbeliever in the class to watch Steve do each push-up to make sure he did 10 in each set.

As the professor started down the fourth row, he noticed some students from other classes had wandered in and sat down along the sides of the room. There were now 34 students. He was unsure if Steve would be able to make it, but he went on to the next person and the next and the next. Near the end of the row, Steve was really having a hard time. It was taking more effort to complete each set. Just then a recent transfer student came into the room. He was about to enter the room when all of the students at once told him not to come in. He didn't know what was going on, but Steve told him he could enter.

The professor reminded Steve that if he came in he would have to do 10 push-ups for him as well. Steve said he understood that but still told him to come in and get a donut. He asked the student if he wanted a donut and without knowing what was going on he said yes. The professor then asked Steve if he would do 10 push-ups for the student. Steve did 10 very slow and labored push-ups. The student was handed a donut and sat down.

The professor finished the fourth row and started on the visitors seated on the side of the room. With each push-up his arms were shaking as he struggled to lift himself. The only sound in the room was his labored, heavy breathing. By this time, there was not a dry eye in the room.

The last two students were cheerleaders, both well-liked by the professor. He asked the first if she wanted a donut. Very sadly she said “no thank you.” The professor asked quietly if Steve would do 10 push-ups for the donut she did not want. Grunting from the effort, Steve did 10 very slow push-ups for her donut.

He turned to the last girl and asked her if she wanted a donut. With tears streaming down her face she pleaded with the professor to let her help him. With tears also coming down his own face he explained that Steve had to do it alone. He further explained that this task was given to him and to him alone. He is in charge of seeing that everyone here has the opportunity for a donut whether he wants it or not. He told the class that when he decided to have a party on the last day of class, he looked at the grade book and Steve was the only one with a perfect grade. Everyone else had failed a test, skipped a class or offered inferior work. The professor further explained that when a player messed up in football practice, Steve had to do push-ups. He told Steve that no one else could come to the party unless he paid the price by doing your push-ups. He and Steve had made a deal for each of them. He then asked Steve if he would do 10 push-ups so she could have a donut.

As Steve very slowly finished his last push-up, with the understanding that he had accomplished all that was required of him, having done 350 push-ups, his arms buckled beneath him and he fell to the floor.

Dr. Christianson turned to the room and said, “And so it was, that our Savior, Jesus Christ, plead to the Father, ‘Into Your hands I commit My spirit’ with the understanding that He had accomplished all that was required of Him, He yielded up His life for us.” He then said “like so many in this room, many leave the gift on the desk, uneaten.”

The professor then explained that it was his wish that they might understand and fully comprehend all

the riches of grace and mercy that have been given to the students through the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. God didn’t spare His only begotten Son, but gave Him up for everyone, for the whole world, now and forever. Whether you choose to accept His gift, His provision, the price for our sins has been paid. Wouldn’t it be foolish and wouldn’t it be ungrateful just to leave it lying on the desk?”

God’s greatest provision is for our salvation through His Son, Jesus Christ so that by faith when we believe in Him, that He died for our sin, gives to us eternal life. It’s freely offered to us because He loves us.

As we prepare for communion this morning, I want to teach you a little chorus. It’s not in this hymnal though some of you may know it from years ago. It’s based on **John 3:16**.

For God So Loved the World

For God so loved the world,
He gave His only Son,
To die on Calv’ry’s tree,
From sin to set me free;
Someday He’s coming back,
What glory that will be
Wonderful His love to me.

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(COMMUNION)

I know a fount where sins are washed away;
I know a fount where night is turned to day.
Burdens are lifted; blind eyes made to see.
There’s a wonder working pow’r in the blood of
Calvary.