

The Rev. Billy Cerveny:

Good to see you. So the other night, I was at dinner with, some friends, and we were talking about what was the greatest present you've ever received. And I was. I had to think for a minute because I, you know, you get you get a lot of gifts of in a lot, number of years you live and, and I remember thinking back, I said, you know what?

I know what it is better than the water bed my grandmother gave me when I was 15, better than the Styx Grand Illusion album my sister gave me in 1980 or whatever was my first record. The greatest gift I ever got was a 1971 glass Tron ski machine. It was a ski boat that my folks got me.

I was 15 years old. Now, if North Florida was a ski boat, it would be this boat. It was this, like, neatly sparkly boat with, you know, the glitter paint job down the side. You know, I'm talking about if you're from here, you know what I'm talking about. It had or it had an old Johnson engine had this gurgle to it.

Glug glug glug. It was amazing. It was total freedom. It was also a complete act of parental indiscretion. They had no business giving me a ski boat. This is way before water safety was invented and accountability had no sense of what I was doing. I had never driven a boat, like, in any real way at that point. And I remember the first day going out with my buddy, and we filled up these gas tanks and we jumped in.

We're going back into Mcgurk's Creek. We're on a hydro slide getting up into the woods, and we get in the back and it's just we're just zipping along and we pull to the side and we're just kind of hanging out. Isn't this awesome? And all of a sudden, the engine died as one of the good guys wouldn't start again.

Oh my gosh. First day. We're good. You wouldn't start again. I couldn't figure it out. I pulled the choke out I went out. Can I pump the bulb on the on the old gas tank. You know, remember those. You'd pump the bulb on the gas tanks. I was pulling the choke out Trish trying to get everything.

Did everything I knew how to do. Adjusting the electrical cables on the battery. It wouldn't work. And all of a sudden I noticed that there was water coming into my boat. And I'm thinking, no, this is not good. What am I going to do in this moment? And my friend there were there about 20, 30 minutes were drifted downstream.

We're in we're into the weeds back there. And my friend says, hey, what's this knob for? And what are you talking about? And he turned. He reached back on the gas tank. There's this little metal knob, and he turns it, and it switch from one gas tank to the other gas tank. And first one was empty, and I thought, and all of a sudden, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom.

And we took off. And I realized later I had not put the plug in the boat because I didn't know about that.

It's amazing. That story is a picture of my the first part of my Christian life. I remember when I, when I first came to Jesus and I remember having this incredible experience with the Lord. It was like, man, it was it was I was this shiny new glitter boat of faith. I was just zipping through life, zipping across the water, just the gurgle of the engine.

And I was free. And I remember just thinking to myself, is this what life is going to be now? This is it. This is total freedom. And I remember just kind of getting deep in the water and all of a sudden, you know, life starts coming at you. You know, things don't always go the way they go. You know, you've had this in your life.

You know, work happens, you get marriage issues, you go and you know, your life doesn't unfold the way you think it should, or you have health problems or someone you love has health problems. And you go down the list and all of a sudden things start that those things that once felt so free all of a sudden feel really heavy, and you feel like you've been cut adrift and you're like, where is that engine?

Where is that power? Where's that thing that just drove me in and glided me across the water? Because right now I feel really deep in the woods and I try everything I know how to try. I go in and I pull the choke off reading my Bible or a pump the bulb and I try to pray more, but nothing.

I can't get anything out of my engine. And you get in those moments and you have the that place in Christianity is feels like an idea or some code you have to lift up to, and you're just drifting a bit further away from who you think you're supposed to be, and you drifting further away from God in this shame and asking yourself, am I just doing this wrong?

Can you relate to that? Like you can? I sure can. See, the good news is this, if that's you or you've been in that place, or maybe you're there right now. There's this knob over here. I want to tell you about. There's a knob. I want to turn it. Now. What I want to do is I want to turn it, I want to I want us to read this gospel.

We just read John chapter three, because this is the fuel of the gospel. It's the power of the gospel. If you have your Bibles, you can turn to, John chapter three. Matthew is the if you get to the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. It's the fourth book of the Bible, chapter three. It's after two before four.

Let me give you a little set up here. Jesus is in Jerusalem and Jesus just notoriety is already is. He's gained a lot at this point. Jesus is at a place where he's committing miracles, he's performing miracles, and people are astonished by what he's doing. And they're not just asking who he is or asking what is he?

But now, on the same time, on the flip side of that, Jesus is also sticking his finger in the eye of all the religious people. He's going into the temple. And the previous chapter, he had just gone in the temple and he drove the moneychangers out, flipped over the tables, won. Very popular with the religious rulers at this moment, what we see in chapter three, John says that there's this Pharisee, his name is Nicodemus.

It says A ruler of the Jews came to him at night saying, we know that you were a teacher who comes from God, because no one can do these signs unless God is with him. Now a couple

things. We'll stop right here. It's nighttime and Nicodemus is coming to Jesus, and he's coming at nighttime for a reason that you get this picture, that he's actually sneaking around a little bit, that he's actually trying to figure out what this Jesus thing's all about, and he doesn't want the people that are hostile to Jesus to find out.

So he comes and he's sneaking in to see Jesus. He's deeply curious. And the next thing we see in this verse is we know it's not just him that's curious, because it says, we know that you are from God. So the implication is that he's huddled together with some of his Pharisees buddies and he's like, hey, man, what do you think about this Jesus guy?

I don't know, you ask him. No, you ask him. All right. Nicodemus, it's your turn. You drew the short straw. So Nicodemus is sent and John, the writer of this, the apostle John, the writer of this gospel, he's his master. And he uses these wonderful metaphors throughout the entire, gospel of John of light and darkness. And it's this metaphor for spiritual blindness in revelation.

So the implication is Nicodemus is coming. He's coming at night. He's sneaking around, but he doesn't get it. He didn't fully understand what's happening in this place. It's interesting to see that Nicodemus or Nicky is his friends called him. He's not asking Jesus the question. He comes in and he says he's making a statement. He's saying, clearly, God is with you.

He's not wrong. He's just a little incomplete. But what Jesus does is Jesus tends to do. He grabs him by the lapels. He's like, all right, we're going to go down this rabbit hole. And he takes him in this hard left turn. And he says in verse three, because unless you are born again, you cannot see the kingdom of God.

And Nicodemus is like, what? What are you talking about? Like, what do you mean, born again? How can someone enter their mother's womb again and be born a second time? And Jesus goes further because no, you have to be born of the water, and you have to be born of the spirit, and the wind blows wherever it wants to blow.

It's like that. So it is with everyone that's born of the spirit, everyone that's born from above. Flesh begets flesh, and spirit begets spirit. And Nicodemus is totally lost. He's like, And in verse

nine, Jesus is incredulous. He looks at him. He says, aren't you the teacher of Israel? And you don't get this.

Now, I'll be honest that I know what Jesus is talking about here. I live on a different part of the story than this, and I've studied this a lot. I understand about being born again and all of that, but I gotta be honest, I still find this passage a little confusing. And, if I'm Nicodemus, especially if I'm Nicodemus, when you read this, this whole born again stuff must have been this new idea that was dropped in his lap and his Jesus not being very charitable in this moment.

But the truth is, when you read it and you read it more closely, Jesus. The problem Jesus was having with Nicodemus was this wasn't a new idea, this idea of being born again. He wasn't inventing this born again language. In fact, there was something foundational in Scripture that Jesus knew about and was pointing Nicodemus towards. And Nicodemus was missing.

It 600 years ago. Israel, they had been really disobedient, and they were worshiping all kinds of idols, and they weren't being kind to the widows and the orphans, and they had thrown off God's law. And they were they were being cruel to each other. And it was just things were not going well. And what God did is God is prone to do.

He suffers. He suffers for a while, but eventually he's going to bring it, bring his children back. He's going to bring him to heal. And the way he does is he raise up this army, the Babylonians, and he brings the Babylonians, and they come in and Israel is destroyed. The temple is destroyed, the people are exiled. This is where we get the book of Daniel Daniel's brought into exile.

And he writes, the book of Daniel is where we get the book of Lamentations, is where we see the prophet Jeremiah. But this is also where we see the prophet Ezekiel, Ezekiel and the book of Ezekiel. God is speaking through the prophet Ezekiel, aptly named. And what he's saying to Israel at this point is he makes a promise.

He's saying, hey guys, I have not forgotten you, I love you, you're my children. I rejoice over you with singing and I will bring you home. And in verse chapter 36, verse 25, he says, I'm going to

sprinkle you with clean water, and you shall be clean, and I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you.

And then you turn the page to Ezekiel 37. This is beautiful. It's crazy vision that Ezekiel's given. Ezekiel finds himself and he's standing in this valley, in this area, dusty desert place, and he looks around as far as the eye can see. It's covered with human bones, these dry bones that are just torn apart and spread as far as you can see.

And the Lord says to Ezekiel, he says, speak the word of the Lord over these bones. Speak the word of the Lord over this picture of death, over this picture of loneliness, over this, over of this lifelessness and hopelessness. And he speaks the word of the Lord over these bones. And they begin to rattle these rattling bones, and they begin to reassemble, and they come together and flesh begins to form on these bodies, and all of a sudden, as far as the eye can see, all of those bones have reconstituted, and they're standing there, but they're not alive.

And then the Lord says to him, come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live. And it says, its exceedingly great army comes to life. That's intense. It. I don't have dreams like that. So when John three, when Nicodemus comes up and he's talking to Jesus about what are you doing?

Like, I know you're from God and Jesus, what he's doing is he's dropping these massive breadcrumbs for physical. He's dropping these things, and he's he said, you've got to be born again. You got to be born of water in spirit. Like we just read The Wind of the spirit. You got to be born from above by that same spirit, the word for wind and the word for breath, and the word for spirit of the same word in Hebrew, Ruach, the word for spirit, the word for wind in Greek is the same word pneuma.

The idea is they're interchangeable. So what's happened is Jesus is dropping these giant breadcrumbs and he's incredulous because Nicodemus is not picking up what he's putting down. Nicodemus grew up with these stories. This was like, these were a bedtime stories for Nicodemus, and now he's Israel. And that's his job to teach these stories. And Nicodemus, he doesn't understand it because he misunderstood what Ezekiel was all about.

See, what Nicodemus thought was the God raising up this army of people was about reconstituting the nation of Israel. So Nicodemus thought, was that God was just about restoring the nation, giving them a homeland, making them a nation. And Jesus, who is the true Israel, the greater Israel. What are you saying in John three said, this is not about a national restoration.

This is not about me restoring your national identity. This is about me taking dead things and making them alive again. This is about me taking dead things and making them alive again.

Nicodemus didn't see it. Why? Why couldn't Nicodemus see that peace? This not just because he misunderstood the story. See, Nicodemus couldn't see it because Nicodemus was the best person in every room that he was ever in, every room that he went in. Nicodemus was the man. He was one of the great Pharisees. Everywhere he went, he knew the Bible.

He had tons of religious friends. He didn't just go to church. He lived in church. That was his jam, his seeming moral victory and his moral victory. He could not see what Jesus saw. Nicodemus couldn't see that he was spiritually dead. Nicodemus couldn't see that he was one of those sets of dry bones in the valley that needed to be born from above, that needed that wind, that breath of the spirit to come in and fill him.

So Jesus was saying to Nicodemus, he was saying them, hey, you don't need to turn over a new leaf, man. This isn't about you doing it better, about you tightening the bolts. You need an entire ontological reworking here, man. You need to become something new altogether.

You know, so often when we think about our faith and we think about salvation, what does it mean to come to Jesus? So often? It's so easy for me to think about. My boat is stalled, and I'm just drifting downstream in the darkening waters and the water is coming in because I don't know how to put the plug in.

Right. And I can't get things working. And Jesus comes around before I'm about to sink and I'm going under and Jesus says, hey. And he goes, and he throws me this line, and I catch the rope and I'm saved. And now I'm being pulled in. I can live this Christian life because Jesus is throwing

me the lifeline. Let me tell you this, if that's how you think about your salvation, if that is how you think about your salvation, the strength of about of your salvation is only as strong as your grip on that rope.

It's all about you. It's all about you. Because what do you do when you find yourself adrift?

What do you do when the current gets strong and your hands start to hurt and you get in rope burn and you just can't hang on? What do you do when your engine won't start? What do you do when the water's coming in? You frantically do in these things to try to get to get the boat to go, but it doesn't work.

And then you think to yourself, to Jesus, let go of the rope! I've blown it, I've blown it. And here I am, floating farther and further away from who am I'm supposed to be. See, the beautiful thing is, in John three, it totally reframes our understanding of what it means to be saved and what it means to be in Jesus.

We are not perilously floating into the bushes because our engine is stalled before we come to Jesus. I'm not taking on water and I'm about to go under. That's not the picture he's given us. Before I come to Jesus, you know what I am? I am dead at the bottom of the lake. I am at the bottom of the river.

Bones.

Separated from bones. I am dead. And the message of the cross is this. You were dead in your transgression. But Jesus, in his mercy and his rescue mission, what he does is he goes on this, this, this deep dive and pulls your spiritual corpse from the mire of the deep, and he washes you with clean water. You are born of water by the cross.

You are washed clean. Your sins, everything you've ever done, everything you will do, the things that you are doing right now. They are washed away from you. You are born of the spirit, the

breath of God, the new Mother Ruach in the same way he breathes it into the nostrils of Adam through the Holy Spirit. Jesus Himself enters into you and you are made alive.

We are not thrown a line. We are dead on the bottom of the river. And he pulls us up and he offers us new life. Galatians 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me and the life I live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me, and he gave his life for me.

That is it. Amen. And this is if this is true, and it is, the implications of that are really, really profound. And really I encourage you slow your roll and let's think about this for a second. And I'm speaking right now, especially to those people in here who are just tired, those for whom religion just it just doesn't work.

I can't hold the rope. I'm tired of holding the rope. I don't want to hold the rope. People floating downstream. And you just don't. It doesn't matter how many times you pump the bulb on that tank, you just can't get your engine to start. The beautiful thing is, this is what it means when you are in Christ.

You are wholly and completely a new thing. You're a new thing and you are defined by this life of Christ. You are reconstituted. Jesus, the creator of the universe, came on a mission of recreation. You are to logically a new thing, what you are to the foundation of your being. You are redefined and that life that has come in you, that life of Christ that I just read about in Galatians two, that is what defines you.

It is not only what defines you, it is what sustains you. Me, here, this, here, this. The Christian life, the Christian not life is not you living for Jesus. The Christian life is Christ living his life through you, the Holy Spirit moving through you. It is all. It begins with Jesus. It ends with Jesus. And let me tell you what all the Bible studies, all the prayers, all the trips to the communion rail, they will not animate you.

They never were meant to. They are there to remind you of what Jesus is doing in you, what Jesus is doing through you. He is the Christian life. He is living it. You were never meant to. He is

the power of salvation. You see, the so often like we preach forgiveness and forgiveness. Listen, fall on your face before the Lord.

Fall on our face before the cross. We are forgiven. We are forgiven by Jesus. All the things that we have done. And trust me, there are many now to speak for myself. We are forgiven. But that's only half the gospel. It's only half of it. That's the message. Jesus's death on the cross. But the message of his resurrection is an entirely different thing.

You see, without his resurrection, all we are doing is that we are forgiven and the Holy Spirit is comes. And what does it just kind of a helper for us? The now the God says, oh, you're on the team. So now go get them. That's not the story. Jesus doesn't just pull us alongside us and then tell us to live the Christian life.

What he does is he come in, dwells in us. Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life. He does not say, I dispense life. He does not say, I teach you how to get life. He says, I am the resurrection. I am the life, and I will come, and I will dwell in you. Christ in you. The hope of glory.

If you are in Jesus, you have this life. Turn in that now. If you are in Jesus, you have that life. It is in you. You are made alive in him.

And the all the Bible studies and all the things I just mentioned are the tools by which we learn to stand in the realities of that truth. And your job as a believer. My job as a believer, my job as a Christian, is to become so familiar with the work that Jesus has done in me, so familiar with his character, his heart, that thing that defines me now, how do I do that?

I read his word. I come to church, I sing worship songs. I come to the communion rail. The more I marinate in this, the more it stirs me, the more I understand not just who he is, but now who I am and the life I have in him. I learned what it means to cut with the grain of this what it means to live ruthlessly dependent upon this life.

Now I know there's people in this room who say, man, I know that, and I've lived that way, but I've blown it, man. You don't know the things I've done. You don't know the struggles I have. You don't know what I'm currently dealing with. You don't know what my marriage is like. You don't know what my job is like.

You don't know the secrets I have hidden. I have hidden that I've never told another person. Yes, I do, yes I do, because I know my own heart. Listen, I get it. The message of the gospel.

It's not clean up so you can get in the shower. All right? It's come. All your heavy work, heavy burden and find rest. Let me ask you this question. When you consider the dry bones in Ezekiel and them laying on the ground across the bank, what did they do to deserve their reconstitution and reanimation and their resurrection?

What did they do? Nothing. They didn't do a thing. They brought nothing to the table. The only value they had was because the heart of God was set upon them. Why, man, I don't know. That's grace, isn't it? They did nothing to earn what they were given. In the same way, you have done nothing to earn what you've been given.

You did nothing to have God breathe his life in you except be loved by God. Wow. And let me ask you this. If you did nothing to earn this resurrection, what makes you think you can do something to lose it?

If you did nothing to earn it, what makes you think you can do something to lose it?

Amen. Man, this is huge. This is huge. Especially for people who are worn out. Yeah, I can taste that. You just tired, man. Tired of trying to be this thing and, you know, shifting the suitcase from one hand to the other. Just. Lord, I don't know that life in that resurrection that's been given to us has nothing to do with what you've done.

Nothing to do with what you are doing, and nothing to do with what you will do. That life you've been given has nothing to do with that. But I'll tell you this the shape and texture of what you

are doing and are going to do in your life hinges on your willingness to turn this knob, and your willingness to receive and depend on the life you've been given.

And Jesus cannot do it. Will I receive this? Will I? Will I fall in headlong into the grace of who you are, Jesus, and what you have given me? Jesus did not come to make bad people good. Jesus came to make dead people alive. He became to make dead people alive. Like it says in Ezekiel 37, he will raise an army.

He has and he will. And I'm looking at it. I'm looking at it. You're right there. The question is, will you let yourself be?

Can we receive that? Can we walk in the freedom of that? Can we hear the gurgle of the engine? We turn the knob, the stand in the realities of what he is doing, that mercy of Jesus who scooped us from the floor of the riverbed to wash this of the muck and mire, who made us new alive in him.

If that's you today, I. My prayer over you is freedom that we can drink that deep man. If that's not you, maybe you don't know Jesus. Maybe you don't know Jesus in that way. You're like, wait, is this weird, man? What are you talking about? Maybe you get that kind of Nicodemus thing right now. Like, what's happening? Maybe the Lord's pulling on you right now.

Maybe the Lord's inviting you to jump in. Maybe the Lord's saying, it's your turn. I'm here and I'm picking you up, and I'm breathing new life in you. And I'm pulling your bones together. Maybe that's you tonight. It is I, I don't miss this moment. Okay. Amen. Amen. Let's pray. Father. Thank you.

Thank you that you didn't come just to make us better people. Though you do improve us. That's not what I'm saying. But you know, Lord, that you came to make dead men alive. Dead women alive, Lord, you came to breathe not just life into us and stepped back, but you came to breathe your very spirit, your living presence into us.

And it is no longer us who live, but it's you who lives in us.

And our journey is to walk in the realities of that truth. Lord, I pray, Holy Spirit, would you open the eyes of a heart? Lord, I pray for that person in the room. Or maybe these people in the room tonight, whoever they are who's tired, he's just worn out and maybe came through this door doors tonight. I'll try this Christianity thing one more time and let me see, I pray, Lord, if that if that person's here, Lord, you open the eyes of their heart, let them see that the power that you have for them.

Turn that now. I'm still walk in the reality of the life they have been given in you. And Lord, if there's someone in this room where there's people in this room that do not know Jesus, I do not know you. And maybe they thought they had. I pray tonight is the night that is you. Open your heart. Open your palms, your hands.

And know that you belong to a Savior who would bring you into this room. To hear this message. That you could step from death to life.

Father, I thank you that you are who you say you are, I thank you. You are God that makes dead things alive. And I pray all this in your name, Jesus. Amen.