

## **The Rev. Charlie Holt:**

Well, we've come in our lectionary readings, the Bible readings to the most famous passage in all of the Bible. I would bet that all of you have that memorized. You. If you're ever playing on a football field and you put the black paint, you would inscribe it underneath your eyes, right? What am I talking about? John 316. Can you do you feel like you can say it from heart?

Do you have it memorized? God. So loved the world that he gave his only begotten son to the end, that all who believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. And you know, give or take a way of saying a word. But you guys did pretty well. That's good. You got, you know, the Bible and you know the gospel in a nutshell is, John 316, that's why it's such a beloved passage, is because it really does give the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ that.

But here's the here's the thing that the context of that verse is very interested in. And it's and it starts back up in chapter two at the very end of chapter two. But what John, the gospel writers is concerned about is what does it mean to believe? What does it mean to believe and be saved? Now, the word in Greek that is used in John's Gospel is a fun word to say.

It's the Greek word *pistule*. Go ahead. You know, I know you want to say it. *Pistule*. Yeah, that's the Greek word for faith or belief or trust can be translated and all those different ways. And like all words, there is a semantic range as to what it can mean. And just because we say that we have belief in something or we believe something doesn't necessarily mean that we have saving belief, which is what John is very concerned to have because he's writing his gospel.

So that and this was the point that John says at the very end of his gospel, these things are written so that you might believe in Jesus Christ, and that by believing in him, have life in his name. He wants you to believe and to have the type of belief that is saving faith. There was a one of the famous church fathers named Thomas Aquinas, very, very famous Catholic theologian, who wrote a lot, his famous work is the *summa theology*.

It's this big, big book. And, I'm doing like this because that's how many pages it is. It's long, but one of the points that Thomas Aquinas makes is that there is, a faith that is an unformed faith,

and there is a faith that is a formed faith. And this is really the picture that that John is painting in his gospel.

And I'm going to pick back up in John chapter two a little bit before our passage that we read this morning. This is John chapter two, verse 23. Now when Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. So there's the word festival. Many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing.

But Jesus did not accept that faith. It goes on to say, But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people, and he did not need anyone to bear witness about man, about humanity, for he himself knew what was in a man. So here were people who believed in his name, and yet Jesus would not entrust himself to them.

Why? Because they had unformed faith. They had a faith that was interested in the sensational signs that he was doing, and they were excited about him being maybe a good teacher from God. But they didn't really have the kind of faith that Jesus was looking for that would lead them to actually be saved. And so here is a point example.

Wow, that light just came on and spotlighted right on the people sitting over there. Glory. It's pretty cool.

God is calling you very specifically.

Yes. These lights in here, they go on and off all the time. So there was a man, so he knows what is in a man. That's the key verse. The Lord knows what is in a man. Do you remember the show The Grinch That Stole Christmas? And what was the problem with the Grinch? He had a heart that was three sizes too small.

Remember that? And in The Grinch Stole Christmas, there was this stick at the end of the stick was this square x ray machine, and you could stick it in front of people's hearts and you could

tell the condition of their hearts. And so the Grinch, you know, in the in this show, the little thing goes over his heart and you could see it, it actually was three sizes too small.

So this is what John's point is. Jesus has one of those kind of x ray machines. He knows what is inside a man. He knows what's going on inside of all of your hearts. In fact, we pray this whenever we come into a worship service. So, Almighty God, to you all hearts are known, all desires known. And from you no secrets are hid.

He knows the thoughts and the conditions of our hearts, and whether there are three sizes too small or they're just right. And so, here's Nicodemus, who comes on the scene, and Jesus knows what is in his heart. And Nicodemus is basically playing the part. He's believing in Jesus because of the signs. Listen to the way that he puts it.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night. Now that's a clue about the condition of Nicodemus, his heart. Why would he come to Jesus at night? Anybody? Well, because he fears people more than he fears God. He's a people pleaser. And this is this is true of a lot of us that we have people and the opinion of others ahead of the opinion of the Lord.

So Nicodemus is testing the waters with Jesus. I think you I think, Rabbi, we know that you were a teacher from God. In other words, you're a good teacher. You're a godly teacher because nobody could do the signs that you're doing if God were not with him. So Nicodemus has a type of faith, but Jesus is going to put his finger on Nicodemus problem with these next words.

Jesus answered him, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. And then he would repeat that after Nicodemus was born again. What do you mean by that? Am I supposed to go back into my mother's womb? I don't get it. Does not compute. And Jesus says it again. He says, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

There is something, Nicodemus, that you are lacking that is preventing you from seeing the kingdom of God and from entering the kingdom of God. In other words, Nicodemus, you are

lacking the type of faith that would have you be saved. And I'm concerned about you in this way, and this is what you need. You need to be born again.

Or another way of saying it, born from above. The. I hate to keep throwing out Greek words to you, but they're just so fun. The Greek word for born again is a notion which is, could either be translated again or from above. And in the translations, you see both of them, and one of them is thinking about it from a temporal standpoint, meaning, Nicodemus, what you need is to be born with a new start.

You need to be born again. You need a fresh start. You need to go back in time and get a begin a new beginning. Maybe there's another way to think about that. It's a temporal way of looking at that word. Another way to think about it is spatially, we need not to be born of the earth or of the flesh is the way Jesus put it.

But we need to be born of heaven. You need to be born of above. You need to be born of God, born of the spirit. So all the ways that that he is explaining what he means by this. And Nicodemus doesn't get it. He doesn't see it. He doesn't understand it. He doesn't comprehend. And I think Jesus, in that moment, probably had his hand on his head like this and said something like, oh, very.

You call yourself a teacher of Israel and you don't understand these things. You are supposedly an expert in the entire Bible, and you can't figure this out. And what Jesus is bringing to Nicodemus attention is actually that the entirety of what we call the Old Testament now was about this one singular point that humanity is corrupt from the heart, that all of us have a heart that's three sizes too small, that every single one of us have, a heart that has been hardened by the fall into sin, a heart that is rebellious against God, a heart that is stiff necked and stubborn and stone like a heart that is dead.

The. The big dramatic moment in the prophetic works was when Jeremiah gave the sentence on the human heart. He says, the heart of man is wicked and deceitful above all things. Who can fathom it? Well, of course the Lord can fathom it. Why? Because he knows what is in a man. He knows the condition of Nicodemus, his heart.

He knows the condition of the hearts of all the people of this world. And guess what? Now we want to get to personal. But I'm going to get too personal. He knows the condition of your heart. He knows the condition of my heart. He sees exactly what's going on in your heart.

And so, what the Lord is saying through the prophetic works. And this is, this is all through the grand conclusion of the Old Testament, that if Nicodemus really understood the Bible, he would know this, that what is needed is a heart reset, a heart transplant, a new beginning of the heart. And this is what Jesus is getting at when he's talking about you need to be born from above or born again.

You need a you need a fresh start. The way the prophets put it is the Lord promises that I'm going to remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I'm going to, take away that that, that hardness of heart. And I'm going to put my Holy Spirit within you. Now, Nicodemus doesn't understand this at all at this point.

And but Jesus goes on to take him to another level, and he reminds him about an Old Testament story in passage, which is a little cryptic for us, probably. This is what the Lord goes on to say to Nicodemus. He says, are you a teacher of Israel? And yet you don't understand. Truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, bear witness to what we've seen, but you don't receive our testimony.

No one has ascended into heaven except he descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. Now, remember, John is focused on this word belief. And what does it mean to believe in Jesus?

To receive salvation and eternal life? To believe on to life. And He and he tells this. He has this verse about just like Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness. Does everybody remember that story? Some of you probably don't. It's a good one. Let's go back to numbers 21. Do you remember the Israelites? They were, slaves and captives in Egypt.

And they were stubborn and they were stiff necked, and the Lord had to take them through a process of getting that slave mentality out of their system. And so he had them do laps around the wilderness of, of the, of the, Sinai Peninsula for 40 years until they could get Egypt out of Israel.

And also they were wandering around, they were always complaining and grumbling against the Lord and against Moses. And they reached a point where their hardness of heart and their rebellion against God was really quite pronounced. And the Lord, in a sense, said enough. This is, numbers chapter 21. It says, from Mount Hor they set up, by their way, to the Red sea to go around the land of Edam.

And the people became impatient on the way, and the people spoke against God and against Moses. Why have you brought us up out of Egypt? To die in the wilderness? There's no food. There's no water, and we load this worthless food. Ooh! What were they saying? They loathed the gracious provision of God, of manna and the quail. They were they were basically, saying they loathed the communion that God was giving them.

Wow. That's pushing things a little too far. And so the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and they said, we send you. Thank we send. For we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord that he would take away the serpents from us.

So here they've all been snake bitten, and they've got the venom coursing through their veins. And they know by watching some of their colleagues that it's only a short matter of time, that every single one of them will lie dead on the floor of the wilderness. And they beg God, confessing their sins, save us. We are dead people walking.

We need your help. We need your rescue. And so the Lord said to Moses, this is what you need to do for these people. Take a fiery serpent and fashion it onto a pole, so that everyone who is bitten, when he sees the serpent on the pole, he will live. So Moses made a bronze serpent, and he set it on a pole.

And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. What an interesting story, isn't it? And this is what Jesus is quoting to Nicodemus in John chapter three. He says, this is actually the situation that you're in. Nicodemus, and I don't think you realize it. You are like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness who have just been eaten and bitten by fiery serpents.

You are a dead man walking. You have the venom of the curse and the fall coursing through your veins, and the consequences of your sin and the sin of humanity is going to bring you down and kill you. And you don't see the gravity of your situation. But just as Moses lifted up the serpent on the pole, and everyone who looked to the serpent lived, so must the Son of Man be lifted up on a cross.

In this case, which is also a sign of the curse in the fall, death. And that cross raised up on a pole, and exalted by that sign, God will call all people to himself and everybody who looks to that cross and believes in the Son of God, even though he is perishing, yet will he live.

Do you believe this? I mean, this is the heart of John 3:16 actually, that God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son to the end, that all who believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life. This is not just belief that is looking to Jesus. For a few good tips for living.

Can you give me a few simple steps to have a better marriage, or to do well in my business or leadership skills? You know, some self-help stuff. Know what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is you are a dead man walking, and you have the venom of the curse coursing through your veins, and you need to throw your life into my arms for mercy and believe and trust in me.

No more of this coming to me at night with the timid, seeking. I want to see you surrender your heart and your life to me. That's what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus and that's what he's saying to us. The Lord is not looking for unformed faith. He wants to see faith that is surrendered, that is giving your life to him, that recognizes the gravity of the situation and, and, and falls down at his feet and asks for an appreciation for the grace that is given and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the sacrificial offering of the son on the cross.

I, was talking to my daughter about this course that they're doing at her church, which is called the Alpha Course, and there was a young man who, was participating in the course. He was visiting the church and getting involved in seeking after the Lord, which is all a good, good thing. I don't want to discourage that from anybody.

But he took the Alpha course with a basic course in Christianity. Whose, Jesus? Why did Jesus die? How can I be sure of my faith? How do I pray? Why do I read the Bible? These are the kind of things that are covered on the Alpha course. But then there's this day called the Holy Spirit day. And, this particular fella, he did not want anything to do with the Holy Spirit.

That sounds too weird. Too crazy. That's what those Pentecostals are all into in those charismatics. We don't want to be anywhere close to those cares maniacs. And so he was kind of angry that that was the next step of the Alpha course, but he went anyway, begrudgingly, with a hard heart, and listen to the teachings about who the Holy Spirit was.

And how can I be filled with the Holy Spirit and the Lord? Just like the Lord said to Nicodemus, the Holy Spirit is out of your control. It's like the wind. You don't know where it's going or where it's come from. So it is with those who are born from above, those who are born of the spirit. The flesh gives birth to the flesh, but the spirit gives birth to spirit.

And that man was filled with the Holy Spirit of the living God that day. And my daughter said after that day he was a different person. All of the sudden he is excited about his faith. He he's coming to everything the church had to do. He was anything he could learn about the Bible. He said he I'm reading the Bible every single day.

I just can't get enough of God's word. His heart had been made alive by the power of the living God. That's what Jesus is saying. Nicodemus. This is what you need. So what you desperately need is to have your heart filled with the Holy Spirit of the living God so that you were made, made a new born again, born from above.

And you need to surrender your life to Jesus as your Savior and your Lord. Now that is the call of lent, the call of the church. And that's my prayer for Saint Mark's, not just during this season,

but for us as individuals and as a community that we would be sold out Christians for the Lord, that our hearts would be absolutely filled to the brim with the gift of the Holy Spirit of the living God, and that we would be sold out.

Christians who know that we know that we know that we are in desperate need of what Jesus is offering to us on the cross. Not a bunch of, what do they call it? A refuge for sinners, but a hospital or a refuge for saints, a hospital for sinners. That that's what the church is for. I really butchered that one.

I want to I want us to pray. There's a there's a wonderful passage. There's a lot about the Holy Spirit and salvation that's out of our control. There's the God that that sends these things, and he calls people. But he may be calling some of you. And the Lord also says this in another place. He says, ask, and it will be given to you.

Knock, and the door will be opened. Seek and you will find the father wants to give good gifts to his children. And how much more will the father from heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask? So I want to pray and ask the Holy Spirit to fill us, to fill this church, and to fill us as individuals.

And you may have a very simple prayer that you can just pray in the quietness of your own pew of. Or if you're watching online at your home, that to pray, Lord, fill me with your Holy Spirit. So let us pray. Heavenly father, thank you for calling us to see our desperate need for Your Son, Jesus.

We have been snake bit by the fall and under the threat of the curse, even unto death. And yet you've promised through the gift of your son that if we believe in him, we will receive life in his name, that we wouldn't perish but have eternal life. So, Lord, help me to believe.

I know that more than anything else, what I desperately need is the gift of your Holy Spirit coursing through my inmost being. That you see my heart. You know the condition of it. This is a kind of prayers to pray. Lord you, you know my heart.

Fill me with your Holy Spirit. Cleanse me and wash me through and through, and set my heart on fire for you. Lord, I want to give my life to you as my Lord and Savior.

In Jesus name we pray. Amen.