

The Rev. Charlie Holt:

Well, we come to, I think, what is probably the most famous passage in all of Scripture. I would just guess that most of you have it memorized. John, what? 316? Do you ever write it on? On the black paint under your eyes as the football players do, or put it up on your mirror and your car or, in the, under an overpass?

Some people have spray painted it under an overpass. And you can see this verse all over the place. It's almost part of our culture. John 316 God, so what? Love the world that he gave his only begotten son to the end, that all who believe in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life. That's a good one to have memorized.

It really is the gospel in a nutshell. One of the things that John, the writer of the gospel, is concerned about as he is coming to this big punchline of John 316, is, what does it mean to believe in him? Because that's the operative word. Actually, in the whole verse is if we believe in him, we shall not perish.

But have everlasting life. So that's a really important word to understand what that means, don't you think? What does it mean to believe in Jesus? The Greek word is the word *pistule*, which is kind of a fun word to say. Might want to say it. *Pesto*. Isn't that fun? Yeah. It means, to believe. To trust in. John will give it the sense of receiving Jesus.

But it's believing in him and trusting ourselves to him. Trusting, having faith. That's another way that you could translate it. We have faith in Jesus. We have pasta. Whoa! Now, earlier in the gospel in John chapter two, Jesus points out that there is a type of faith, a type of *pasta duo* that is not saving faith. And this is this is the whole point of what he's getting at, is that there were people.

Well, I'll just read the passage. It's John chapter two, verse 23 says, now when Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name. There's the word *pasta*. How many had faith in his name? Or many believed in his name? Why? Because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them.

So he didn't have faith in them where he would entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man. And we might be man or woman, but about human beings. He needed no one to bear witness about man. For he himself knew what was in a man. Do you remember the show The Grinch That Stole Christmas?

Remember that one? And what was the problem with the Grinch? His heart was three sizes too small. And they had this wonderful instrument that was, it's like a little X-ray machine on a stick that would come in and reveal to those who are watching the show the condition of the Grinch, his heart. And you could see that it was it was actually three sizes too small.

And what John is saying is that Jesus has that X-ray machine, that he knows exactly the condition of human beings hearts, and he knows that it is possible to have a belief, but still have a heart that is three sizes too small. Thomas Aquinas, one of the great, divines of the church, used to describe the two different types of faith.

He said there is an unformed faith, and there's a formed faith. And, form. Faith is one who is impressed by God, impressed by Jesus, that maybe can give mental assent to. Yeah. That's good. I, I think there's some good teachings that I can learn from Christianity and from God and from the Bible. And so I want to be a part of that and connected to that.

But it really hasn't penetrated to the heart, where really it's the type of moralism where I'm just going to give mental assent that that's good. So the formed faith is one where the faith in God has penetrated to the core of our being, and we are being transfigured or transformed from the inside out. Now, of course, you'll want to have formed faith rather than unformed faith right?

And so as the as the story continues, Jesus knows what is in the heart of a man. Here comes a man. What's his name? Nicodemus. And Jesus knows exactly what is in the heart of Nicodemus. He has exposed his heart to the X-ray machine. And, this is what it says. Now, there was a man of the Pharisees, Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

And this man came to Jesus by night. Now, why would he come by night? Any ideas? Well, the way I read that is he's coming by night because he's more fearful of people than he is of God. That if you're concerned what others think about you more than you're concerned about what the Lord thinks about you, that might be a dead giveaway that your heart is not formed.

But so Nicodemus comes to him by night. And what does he say? Rabbi, we know that you were a teacher from God, for no one can do these signs unless God is with him. In other words, he is like those that Jesus was mentioning just a few verses before that believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing, but he was not yet somebody that Jesus would entrust.

Wow. So Jesus responds to him, truly, truly, I say to you that unless one is born again, I'm quoting from the ESV version of the Bible what we read in the in the front was the new Revised Standard Version. That word for born again can be translated two different ways. It can be translated, but born again or born from above.

And what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is, this is the key, Nicodemus, that you must be born again or born from above. And the concern that Jesus has for him is that that hasn't happened in his life, which is why he is an unformed faith figure. At this point, the Greek word for born again or born from above a noth and it can have either a temporal sense that you need a new start, you need to be born again, or a spatial sense that you need to be born from above, meaning that you are of heavens heavenly born, born from God, born from the divine.

And Nicodemus doesn't get it. He hears Jesus speaking these kinds of things, and he and he's thinking very fleshly, very worldly. He's not thinking from above, he's thinking from below. And he says, well, how can I be go back into my mother's womb? Is this is nonsense. Jesus, what are you talking about? And I can see Jesus, like, slap his hand on his head and go, oh, if they.

You call yourself a teacher of Israel and you don't understand these things. If Nicodemus had really understood his Bible, the Old Testament, he would have known that that was the whole point of the entire Old Testament is that no matter what God did to reach the people of this planet, the consistent problem over and over again was the heart that human beings suffer from a heart.

And this is the grand conclusion of the Old Testament about the heart. In Jeremiah it says, the heart of man is wicked and deceitful above all things. Who can fathom it? In Ezekiel it or, Ezekiel, it talks about the heart being a stone, that it's dead, it's lifeless. It's hard. And this is the problem that we all have, apart from the gift of the Holy Spirit of the living God, is that our hearts are dead.

And if Nicodemus really knew his Bible as a teacher of Israel, he would have known that that there is no connectivity to God apart from a regenerated heart, that you have to have the Holy Spirit of the living God come inside of you and literally enliven you from the inside out to make you born from above, make you born anew and afresh in God's divine power and strength and one of the big challenges with that for all of us is that feels very out of control.

I don't I don't quite understand that Nicodemus is getting at why because Nicodemus wants to stay in control. But the Holy Spirit Jesus says it's not like that. People who are born of the spirit, it's out of control. It's like the wind. Nobody knows where it's coming from or where it's going. So it is with those who are born of the spirit.

Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the spirit is what gives birth to the Holy Spirit. You must be born from above, Nicodemus. You have to have your heart changed and transfigured. Jesus goes on to teach about a lesson from the Old Testament that Nicodemus would have been very familiar with when he says, just like Moses raised up the serpent on the stick in the wilderness.

It's kind of a strange turn of phrase. Moses, just as Moses lifted up a stick, a snake. Weird. Well, it's a story that comes from when the Israelites were wandering through the wilderness. They were enslaved and in bondage to Egypt, and they always look nostalgically back on that worldly existence in Egypt, where they were dependent upon Pharaoh and the largesse of the Egyptian people.

And so Moses is taking them out into this wilderness under the guidance and leadership of God in order to get that slave mentality out of their system. They are they are hard hearted and a stiff necked people is the way they're described. They don't they don't get what God is trying to do in their hearts and in their lives.

With this 4040 year process of getting Egypt out of their system. And so this was an example of numbers, chapter 21, where they are grumbling against God. Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There's no food, there's no water, and we loathe this worthless food. What are they talking about? When they say we loathe this worthless food?

They're complaining against the miraculous provision of God, of manna and quail for them. Where God was teaching them not to live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. And they were despising it in their hearts. So what is the Lord do? The Lord sends fiery serpents among the people, and that many of the people of Israel died.

And the people came to Moses and said, we have sinned. We have spoken against the Lord and against you. I can just see the picture. You know, as soon as you start getting tagged by these fiery, poisonous serpents in your you literally have, I don't know, minutes, days to live. All the sudden you start confessing your sins and repenting.

And that's what they were doing. They were calling out to Moses, okay, okay, okay. We're sorry. We're sorry. We get it. We have sinned against the Lord by grumbling in our hard heartedness. And so Moses interceded for the people. He prayed for them. And he, the Lord says to Moses, this is what I want you to do.

Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole. And everyone who is bitten when he sees it shall 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 a weird thing, But basically what God did was he took the curse.

He said, put it on a pole so that if anybody has in a sense, faith to trust in me, we'll look at that curse on a stick and they'll live. Now, why is Jesus telling this story to Nicodemus, a man of unformed faith? Because Nicodemus is coming to Jesus and all he's wanting is to stay in control of his life.

He wants he wants some good moral teaching and some basic instructions from Jesus to kind of make him a better person. He recognizes, hey, this this seems to come from God. And this is

some good stuff that you're teaching. So I'm curious. I'm not I'm not bold enough to be so excited about you that I'll come to you in the middle of broad daylight where people could see that I'm coming to you.

But I'm curious. He's a seeker, and Jesus challenges Nicodemus to the core of his being and say, you need a heart reset. Nicodemus. Why? Because you are snake bitten. The fiery serpents have bitten you, Nicodemus. And you are a dead man walking.

And the Lord is going to lift up the sign of the curse on a stick like he did with Moses. He's going to put his son on a cross and raise him up for the entire world to see that unless you believe in him. There's John 3:16. What will happen? You will perish. But those who believe in him will have what everlasting life.

The Lord is looking for from us. It's not, lip service or, mental assent or to think that he's good or got some good things to teach us. What the Lord is trying to get us to see is that without him, we are dead.

Without him, we are lost. Without him there is no help in us. There is no life in us that we desperately need to surrender our hearts and our lives to him. One of the reasons why we walk in with a cross on a stick.

Right out of numbers 21. Might as well be a snake on that cross on that stick, but it's not. It's no longer about that curse being lifted up. It's about the curse of the man who hung on a tree. If I be lifted up, Jesus says, I will draw all people to myself. I'm going to take your curse and your poison and your penalty for you, the sting of death.

I will bear it on myself. And if you look to me, you will live. Now we're left hanging of whether Nicodemus surrendered his life and heart to Jesus. At this moment in the story, we don't we don't know how he responded to that call that the Lord placed on him. I was talking to my daughter. She was. She's, ministers at another church, on the other side of the river.

Church of our savior. Good name for a church, by the way. But she was leading and participating in a course called the Alpha Course, which we've done here. It's, of course, it's basic Christianity. And there's a young man that was part of that course. And, and in a lot of ways, he was a lot like Nicodemus at the beginning of the course.

He was interested. He was seeking. He was he thought, there's something here that I need to learn about, that I'm interested in, that I think will be good for me if I participate in church and in these things. And so but then it came to the Holy Spirit day that's on the Alpha course, the Holy Spirit day. And all of a sudden the brakes started going in this young man's life.

He he's like, I don't know about all that. That seems out of control. That seems weird. I'm not into that. And he even he went on the Holy Spirit day, but he went begrudgingly and angrily with a hard heart, actually, that I don't I don't know if I want to be a part of that. And the Lord got a hold of him on the Holy Spirit day, like the wind blows wherever it wants and whether wherever the spirit wills.

And that day the Holy Spirit made him a new person. And my daughter was reflecting on me the dramatic change that she saw prior to that, that here is this person that was a seeker, but all of the sudden he became on fire for his faith that he couldn't stop getting enough of the Holy Scriptures and hearing God's Word and wanting to learn what was in this book and in the Bible.

And, and he wanted to worship, truly worship the Lord with all of his heart, mind, soul, and strength and the passion that she saw in a life that had been born again. And what I would, what I would encourage us. And this is my prayer for us as a church, as a people, for myself, is that we would be of those who are born from above, that our hearts would not be hearts of stone or hearts of flesh, but we would have hearts that have been enlivened by the Spirit of God.

That if Jesus wherever to stick that little heart, investigator over our hearts, that we would see that our hearts weren't three sizes too small, that we would be a people that were on fire for the Lord Jesus Christ, excited about his word and, and surrendered in the sense that we know that we know that we know that we have the venom of evil coursing through our veins, and we

are dead men walking apart from Jesus Christ, and that we know that without him we have no help in ourselves and no life.

Oh Lord, that's what I want for us, that His Spirit would blow like a wind through the pews of this congregation, and touch every heart that is sitting here. Even today. I want to, pray for us. Heavenly father, thank you for the gift of your gospel where you call us not to just give mental assent to Jesus and think he's good, but to recognize that he is the Lord and Savior of the world, and that apart from him we have no life.

And apart from the regenerating work of Your Holy Spirit that we would, be separated from you. And so we ask that you would pour out your Holy Spirit upon the people in this congregation. There's a wonderful promise. And in Jesus's words where he says, if you ask, you will receive. If you seek, you will find. If you knock, the door will be open to you, that the father longs to give good gifts to his children, and especially the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And I invite you to ask God to knock on the door to seek the Holy Spirit of the living God. Even now, in your own prayer, pray with me. Lord, fill me with your Holy Spirit. Lord, fill me with your Holy Spirit.

Set my heart ablaze with your life. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.