

GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD

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Old Testament Lesson; Genesis 12:1-8

Psalm of the Day; Psalm 121

Verse of the Day; Philippians 2:8b

Epistle Lesson; Romans 4:1-5

Romans 4:13-17

Sermon Text; John 3:1-7

John 3:14-16

The text we will look at today is taken from John, chapter three, verses one through seven and then verses fourteen through sixteen.

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these miraculous signs you are doing unless God is with Him.”

Jesus replied, “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born from above, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.”

Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?”

Jesus answered, “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God!

Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh. Whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be surprised when I tell you that you must be born from above. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so

the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

These are your words, Heavenly Father. Lead us in the way of truth. Your Word is truth.

Amen

I am going to ask you to use your imagination. I want you to imagine these two stone pillars, or columns here are actually scales, or gauges, and they are going to measure two things.

The column over here, on the left, is measuring the strength of someone's faith.

-So, let's say at the very bottom of the scale, or gauge would be somebody who has a weak faith in Jesus, as their Savior. They are barely clinging on. They are thinking, *“Can Jesus even forgive somebody like me?”*

Or, maybe their knowledge of Jesus is very basic, and they have a weak faith.

-Let's imagine you go all the way to the top of the scale. This is someone who has a strong faith. They say, *“You could not rip my faith away from me, no matter what you do to me. You could take everything I have, and even kill me.”* They have deep, deep understanding, and trust in Jesus. They know all about Him.

So, there is this scale that measures the strength of faith. The Bible tells us it doesn't matter what strength your faith is, **faith saves**.

Thank God. The Bible says,

**“God so loved the world
that He gave His One and only Son
that whoever believes in Him
(it does not say how strong your faith has to be),**

whoever believes in Him
shall not perish but
have everlasting life.”

That is the scale of how strong faith is.

Over here, on the right side, is another scale. This scale is going to represent fear. It is the fear of what people think of me, if they know I have faith.

-At the bottom of this scale would be somebody who does not have any fear. *“I don't care what people think about me, if they find out I have faith in Jesus.”*

-At the top of the scale are people who would be terrified. *“I have so much to lose. I have so much to lose, if people find out that I have faith in Jesus, as my Savior.”*

I am going to talk about these two scales.

We have something called, ***“The Lutheran Confessions”***. They make this really interesting statement. The statement they make is this. *(We are all here worshipping, but this is very thought provoking),*

“True worship is faith wrestling fear.”

Think about that.

Now, oftentimes, I think when we look at people in The Bible who ran to Jesus, *(and there are lots of them in The Bible I could point out to you)*, oftentimes they are people who we look at that had nothing to lose. They were already at the bottom of the scale. Everybody knew they were terrible sinners. Everybody looked down on them. Their lives were falling apart, and they had nothing to lose. So, they ran to Jesus. But, I think a lot of us in this room are not at that point in life where everyone knows, *“This person has hit the bottom of the scale. They are a dirtball, and have nothing to lose. What is the big deal if they run to Jesus?”* A lot of us are at the point in our lives where we do have a lot to lose, in one sense, if people know we trust in Jesus. We are going to talk through that.

The Bible gives us this really, really interesting example of a man who was wrestling with faith and wrestling with fear. His name is Nicodemus. We are going to look at Nicodemus, and then we are going to see how it applies to our lives.

Look at what our Bible passage says. Right away it introduces us to Nicodemus, and we find out some big things about him, right away. It says,

“There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus...”

Right away we know he was a Pharisee. To be brief, I think most of you know who the Pharisees were. They were a sect of the Jewish people. They were held in high awe by most of the people who were Jewish, because these Pharisees lived such incredibly strict, religious lives, that pretty much, from the moment they woke up to the moment they went to bed, every bit of their life was regulated down to the detail, to try to keep them from committing any sin, whatsoever. So, not only did they look at what The Bible said about sin, but then they added all of these human traditions that they made up. They thought, *“This is going to keep me from committing sin, all day long.”* And so, it regulated where they went, who they talked to, who they touched, what they ate, and when they ate, when they washed their hands, and how many times they washed their hands. It regulated everything. Even how much they worked on The Sabbath Day. These people were highly looked up to as very religious people.

They started out as a group who was trying to keep from committing sin, but over time it twisted into this group that thought, *“You know what? We are so able to stay away from sin that we are earning our way to Heaven.”* They believed in what we call 'Works Righteousness.' They thought they were actually good enough to earn their way into God's favor. Which actually, while they were trying to stay away from sin, is was one of the worst sins you can fall in to, to actually think you can earn God's favor somehow on

your own.

So, Nicodemus was a Pharisee. By in large, the Pharisees had a serious problem with Jesus, because they saw Jesus as someone who was trying to undermine what they were teaching.

-Jesus would heal people on the Sabbath. To them, that was work, and they thought Jesus was sinning, and He was teaching people to sin.

-Jesus' disciples did not wash their hands as often as the Pharisees thought they should, before they ate. They thought that was a sin, and Jesus was leading people to sin.

So, they struggled with Jesus, and by in large, they did not like Jesus, at all.

So, **“There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus...”**

Now, we find something else about him. He is

“...a member of the Jewish ruling council.”

Technically, he was a member of what was called The Sanhedrin.

The Sanhedrin was seventy men. The word '*Sanhedrin*' means, '*seated together*'. They were like an assembly, a council. They were what would be equal to our Supreme Court in the United States.

They were the Jewish Supreme Court. They determined, for all of the land of Israel, much of what was going on religiously, and even a lot of what was going on civilly. These people were in a very prestigious position that was very much looked up to.

The Sanhedrin, by in large, hated Jesus. They hated Him.

-They were the religious judges, and they thought this guy, who was 'claiming' to be God, they thought that was blasphemy. So, they hated Jesus.

-They hated Jesus, because Jesus was taking all of the attention away from the Sanhedrin, and people were becoming interested in Jesus. They were jealous of Jesus.

-They hated Jesus, because they thought somehow He was going to try to start revolt against the Romans, and the Romans would

overtake them, which was not true at all.

So, here is Nicodemus. He is a Pharisee of the Jewish ruling council.

Now, I want you to listen to this. What do you think would happen, if you were a Pharisee, and you were a member of the Jewish ruling council, and you believed in Jesus? Listen to this Bible verse from John, chapter twelve. It says:

“Many did believe in Jesus, even among the rulers (*talking about the Sanhedrin*), but because of the Pharisees, they did not confess Him so that they would not be banned from the synagogue, for they loved human praise more than praise from God.”

Here The Bible tells us there were people, even people who were part of the Sanhedrin, who believed in Jesus, but they were so afraid of what they might lose, that they just believed in Him secretly.

They didn't confess it. They didn't let anybody know. They were embarrassed, and ashamed of their faith in Jesus, because, because they had this great fear of what they had to lose.

-It says they could be banned from the synagogue. In other words, they could be excommunicated.

-It says they loved praise from men more than praise from God. The thought was, *“If people find out I believe in Jesus, they are not going to look up to me, anymore. They are not going to see me as some great leader. I am going to fall from grace among the people. I might even get kicked out of church for believing in Jesus.”*

So, there was a lot at stake for some people to believe in Jesus.

Now, look at what happens in verse two.

“He (*Nicodemus*) came to Jesus at night...”

We find this man who comes at nighttime. We assume it is because he had fears. He did not want people to know. He did not want anybody to know, especially his fellow Sanhedrin, that he has this faith in Jesus. So, he comes at nighttime, and we find faith starting to wrestle with fear. He comes to Jesus at nighttime.

Before we go on, *“Does your faith ever wrestle with fear? Do you ever look how much you have to lose, if people find out, or they know you have faith in Jesus?”*

Let me walk us through some scenarios. Jesus is your treasure, right? He is the most priceless treasure you have. In your conversations, your daily conversations at home, or at work, or with your friends, how often does Jesus even come up? Why not? Why not? Are you afraid of something? Are we afraid of something? Are we afraid of what people might think, or might say?

-How often, when you have a family member who you know is maybe going down a wrong path, or doesn't believe in Jesus, and you are sitting around the dinner table, and you think to yourself, *“I am not going there.”*? Why not? Why not? Are we embarrassed, or ashamed of where it all might go, if we actually confess Jesus, and start talking about our faith.

-When we see something posted on Face Book, or social media where somebody is really saying something that Jesus would not stand for at all, but we think, *“I am not going to post anything.”*, why not? Is there something we are embarrassed of, or we are ashamed of, or we don't want people to know?

-If there is something you are involved in, and you think, *“That would be a huge sacrifice, if I have a boyfriend, or a girlfriend who is leading me away from my faith in one way or another. It would be just too much to lose, if I would actually start talking about my faith.”* What are we afraid of?

-If people walk into your home, can they tell right away by looking at your home, *“Wow, this person is a Christian. They believe in Jesus.”*? If they can't tell that by walking right away in to your home, by what they see on the wall, why not? Is there something we are ashamed of, afraid of, or embarrassed of, for being a Christian? We all have things we could lose, big time, if people understood, and knew what our faith is all about. This was a situation that

Nicodemus was in. So, he comes to Jesus at nighttime. Look at what it says in verse two.

“He came to Jesus at night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these miraculous signs you are doing unless God is with Him.”

Now, here is a little confession of faith. Here Nicodemus calls Jesus

“Rabbi...you are a teacher...”

Then he says, *“I know you are from God. You could not do these things, unless you are from God.”*

So, here is what we assume. His faith, his little faith is thinking Jesus, very possibly, is the Messiah. So, he is speaking to Jesus, and asking Him questions.

Now, I want you to see where Jesus goes with this. He goes, instead of asking Nicodemus, *“Look Nicodemus, what are you going to lose, if you follow me.”*, He flips the table. He wants us to look at, *“What am I going to lose, if I don't follow Jesus? What do I have to lose, if I don't follow Jesus?”*

The first thing Jesus says in verse three,

“Amen, Amen, I tell you:

**Unless someone is born from above,
he cannot see the Kingdom of God.”**

So now, Jesus makes what we call, *An Unless Statement*. The statement is this. ***“Unless you are born from above, or born again, you can't see the Kingdom of God.”***

Now what is Jesus saying there, to Nicodemus? He is saying, *“Nicodemus, the first time you were born, there was something dramatically, drastically, terribly wrong with you. So wrong that you could not even make it in to the Kingdom of Heaven, because of the way you were born.”*

The Bible tells us what that is. It says,

“I was sinful at birth,

sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”

The Bible says,

“We were dead in our trespasses and sins.”

Dead people can't do anything.

And , Nicodemus was of this group that thought,

“We can earn God's favor.

We can earn God's salvation.”

Jesus is saying, ***“Unless you are born again...”***

Of course, we understand from the rest of scripture, Jesus is talking about, ***“Unless you are born again, believe in Me, and come to this new life of faith, believing I am the One who paid for your sins, you cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”***

**Think about what you have to lose,
if you don't believe in Jesus.**

Then, Nicodemus says, ***“How can I born again?”*** He did not understand what Jesus was saying. ***“Can I enter my mother's womb, and be born a second time?”***

Now, Jesus continues to go there. ***“What do you have to lose? Think about what you have to lose, if you don't believe in Me.”***

He says, **Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God! Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh. Whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit.”**

He is telling Nicodemus, ***“The only way, the only way you can be saved is if the Spirit, the Holy Spirit gives you this new birth. You must be born again of the Spirit. This is not something you can do on your own.”***

You can't do it on your own. Flesh gives birth to flesh. Spirit gives birth to the spirit. He does it through ***The Means***.

“Unless someone is born of water and the Spirit...”

Here we believe Jesus is referring to ***The Sacrament of Baptism***. Jesus is saying, ***“Look at what you have to lose, if you don't have***

faith. Unless you have that birth of the Spirit, you can't enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”

And then, Jesus paints this amazing picture for Nicodemus, to show Nicodemus what you really would have to lose, if you did not believe in Jesus. He uses something we call, '*Old Testament typology*'. '*Old Testament typology*', or '*a type*' means there are these '*pictures*' in The Bible, in The Old Testament, of what Jesus is going to look like, or be like, when He comes. So, let's imagine you have never met Joe Biden in person. How would you recognize him, when he walked through the door? Well, you have seen pictures of him. You have seen the pictures, but it is not the real him. It is just a picture. You have also seen him on TV. Because of those pictures, when he comes walking through the door, you would say, "*That is him. I have seen pictures of him.*"

In The Old Testament there are these '*types*', these '*pictures*', so when Jesus came, people would say, "*I saw this 'picture' of Him. That has to be Him.*"

So, He gives this '*picture*' to Nicodemus. Here is the '*picture*'.

**“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness,
so the Son of Man must be lifted up...”**

Now, Nicodemus, being an Old Testament scholar, immediately knew what Jesus was talking about. Here is the '*picture*'. In The Old Testament, (this is fourteen hundred, or fifteen hundred years before Christ), the Jewish people had escaped Egypt.

While they were wandering in the wilderness, they were complaining against God. So the LORD sent these fiery, venous serpents. They would bite the people, and they were deadly. The people would die from these fiery, venomous serpents.

So then, the people cried out to God, and cried out to Moses, "Deliver us. Save us."

The LORD told Moses, "*Here is what I want you to do. I want you to take a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole. Anytime anybody is*

bitten by a snake, all they have to do is look at that bronze serpent, and they will live.”

Pretty simple. In fact, what could be more simple, more plain, and more clear than that? Do you think, if you got bit by a fiery serpent, back in those days, back in Moses' days, you would think to yourself, *“Well, I am not going to look up at that, because what will people think? What will they think, if I look up at that serpent?”*? Wouldn't you have, if you got bit by a fiery serpent, looked at that, and thought, *“What do I have to lose, if I don't look? If I don't look, I have my life to lose. If I just trust God's promise, and I look at that serpent on the pole, I will live. I have everything to gain, if I look, and everything to lose, if I don't believe the promise.”*

And so, Jesus said to Nicodemus,

*“Just as the serpent was lifted up in the desert,
so the Son of Man must be lifted up.”*

Now, Jesus was pointing forward to His death on the cross. It had not happened yet, and I am sure Nicodemus wondered, *“What in the world is Jesus talking about, that Jesus must be lifted up?”*

That is the last that we hear about their conversation with each other. We do find out, probably a year, or two later, Nicodemus is still part of the ruling council. The ruling council, the Sanhedrin, had sent some people to arrest Jesus. These people came back, and they had not arrested Jesus. The ruling council asked, *“Why didn't you arrest Him?”*

They said He was kind of convincing them that maybe He was the Messiah.

So, the Jewish council was berating these men who had not arrested Jesus. Nicodemus, now a part of the ruling council, said this. *“Our law does not judge man before it hears from him, and knows what he is doing, does it?”*

So, he is not confessing outright that he believes in Jesus, but at least he tries to get people to question. We still see his faith, wrestling

with fear.

Then, comes the night Jesus is on trial. Nicodemus is part of the ruling council. The ruling council finds Jesus guilty of blasphemy. It says, "The whole council took Jesus to Pilate. There they wanted Pilate to find Him guilty of claiming to be a King." So, we assume Nicodemus was with them, and he was still afraid. He must have been afraid to stand up for Jesus, and say, "*You can't do this to Jesus*". He must have been ashamed of himself, embarrassed, and afraid of what he might lose. He must have seen his own sin.

And then, when he saw Jesus nailed on that cross, hanging on the cross, it must have all come crashing in on him, "*That's Him. That is Him. Jesus said, 'Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.'*"

Anyone who looked up at that serpent in the wilderness lived, because they trusted God's promise. Nicodemus must have realized at that moment, "*That is how I am saved. It is by looking to the promise of Christ, because Jesus said, 'God so loved the world that He gave His One and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.'*"

Do you know what happened? While everybody else that day ran away, even His disciples, (fear caused them to run away), there were two men who finally overcame their fears. They overcame their fears. Faith overcame fear. They were both members of the Jewish ruling council. One of them was Joseph of Arimathea. The Bible tells us he had secretly believed in Jesus, for fear of the Jews. The other one was Nicodemus. They are the two who came to Pilate, and asked to be able to take Jesus' body from the cross. Now they are not afraid to confess, confess their faith, anymore. And, Nicodemus even bought seventy-five pounds of spices to cover Jesus' body. That was very expensive. But see, Nicodemus' faith finally overcame his fear.

Our Lutheran Confessions say,

**“True worship,
true worship is
faith wrestling with fear.”**

I am going to end with some hymn verses. When I was in high school, I went to a public high school. And you know, when you go to high school, there can be a lot of fears. *“What do people think if I believe in Jesus?”*

Well, somebody showed me this hymn. I am going to read the last three verses. It is in our hymnbook, and is number 347. It asks some important questions. It says:

*Ashamed of Jesus, that dear friend
On whom my hopes of heav'n depend?
No; when I blush, be this my shame,
That I no more revere His name.*

*Ashamed of Jesus? Yes, I may
When I've no guilt to wash away,
No tear to wipe, no good to crave
No fear to quell, no soul to save.*

*Till then – nor is my boasting vain -
Till then I boast a Savior slain;
And oh, may this my glory be:
That Christ is not ashamed of me.*

Wow! Christ is not ashamed of me.

**“God so love the world, the world,
that He gave His One and only Son,
that whoever believes in Him
shall not perish,
but have everlasting life.”**

Amen

Now, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts, and our minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen