

They Met Jesus:
Looking For Answers

The four gospels give us a look into the life of Jesus Christ from four different vantage points. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were all devoted followers of Jesus that God used to write about the life of Christ, and especially the 3 years of His ministry.

Those four Gospels record the intriguing stories of people who met Jesus. Literally hundreds of men, women, and children heard, saw, and many of them personally interacted with Jesus.

These were people who were a lot like you and me. They were people with questions, challenges, hurts, and joys.

In the coming weeks we're going to look at some of those encounters and see what happened. We want to see how the people responded and how Jesus dealt with their problems. Then out of that we want to see how God would want us to deal with our problems.

There are so many people to choose from, but we're going to narrow it down to 7 specific individuals. This morning we want to start with a guy I'd classify as an honest skeptic, a man named Nicodemus.

Skepticism isn't necessarily a bad thing. There's a right and a wrong type of skepticism. The wrong variety of skepticism has doubts and questions and uses those questions as a way to avoid truth.

An honest skeptic has doubts and questions but is willing to look for answers. An honest skeptic is seeking truth, not trying to duck the implications of spiritual truth.

Nicodemus had questions but he was willing to face up to the answers no matter where those answers would lead.

God has a question for you this morning. Are you a truth seeker? Are you willing to follow the evidence, even if it challenges some of the beliefs and assumptions you may have held to for years?

Open to John 3 page 1043

John chapter 3 is home to some of the best-known verses in the Bible, especially John

3:16. It's also the place where we're introduced to Nicodemus.

I. The Bible Gives Honest Answers To Questions From Honest Skeptics

Read verses 1 & 2

You don't pick up on it in most of our English translations but verse 1 in Greek actually begins with an adversative. It begins with a word that means "but." So there's contrast.

At the end of chapter 2 we're told that Jesus didn't commit Himself to the people in Jerusalem who said they believed in Him. The reason was He knew what was in man. (John 2:25)

He knew that these people weren't really sincere. But, Nicodemus is a different story. Nicodemus was skeptical. He was full of questions. But he wasn't using his questions as an excuse to avoid God's call on his life. He was honestly seeking truth.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. Pharisees were a religious sect in Israel that prided themselves on not only keeping the laws that God had laid out in the Bible but keeping all the traditions that Jewish scholars had added down through the centuries.

As soon as you have a law you have to start coming up with interpretations of that law. For example, since it was against God's law to work on the Sabbath day the Jewish leadership had to define work.

So they said tying a rope to a bucket that you'd use to draw water was work, but if a woman tied her sash around her outer garment that wasn't work. You can see how the rules quickly pile up, one on top of another.

The Pharisees as a whole believed that keeping the rules is what got you to heaven. They were very hostile against Jesus' message of grace.

But here was a Pharisee who was willing to think outside the Pharisaical box. He was willing to have his belief system stretched and put to the test. So he comes to Jesus and says, "Something is going on here. Tell me what it is."

He wanted to know. And you know what? When we're honest with God, God gives us the straight-up answer.

Read verse 3

Talk about having your belief system shaken. The Pharisees saw everything in terms of the good people and the bad people. The righteous and the unrighteous. And of course they saw themselves as in the righteous category.

This upstart Rabbi from Nazareth just demolished that house of cards. Jesus put everybody on the same level. We all need to be born again.

Sometimes you hear people say, “He’s a born again Christian.” According to Jesus that’s the only kind of Christian there is. If you’re not born again, you’re not a Christian.

Well if that’s true then it would be absolutely significant and important to know what being born again means. So Nicodemus asks...

Read verse 4

See where things are getting confusing for Nicodemus? He’s thinking in purely physical terms so he says, “You certainly aren’t saying I have to go through the birth process again, are you?” Implication, I know that can’t be.

Here’s Jesus’ answer... **Read verses 5-7**

Some people have mistakenly read baptism into Jesus’ answer because He mentions water. That would have contradicted 150 other clear verses in the New Testament that say that salvation is by faith alone and wouldn’t have made sense to anyone listening to Him. What we call Christian baptism hasn’t even been introduced yet.

The context of this discussion is physical and spiritual birth. Born of water is a reference to physical birth. Born of the Spirit is a reference to spiritual birth.

There’s only one way to get into this world. You have to be born of flesh. There’s only one way to get into God’s kingdom. You have to be born of the Spirit.

Verse 6 is a clear, honest answer to the question, “How do I enter the kingdom of God?” which implies something on the front end; we’re not automatically in God’s kingdom. God’s our Creator but we’re not part of His kingdom unless we experience a new birth. Unless we’re born again. Born from above.

We're sinners who need forgiveness and forgiveness isn't something we work at.

We can take this flesh that we have and clean it up, reform it, scrub and polish it. We can make it look real good. But flesh is flesh and it can't produce a spiritual birth. Only God can do that.

I. The Bible Gives Honest Answers To Questions From Honest Skeptics

II. The Bible Declares That Faith Is The One Way Into God's Kingdom

Since salvation by faith is the heart of the message of biblical Christianity, you'd expect Christians to agree on a definition of faith. What I've found is there's actually a lot of confusion on the definition of faith. And if you think about it, there's an obvious reason why.

The Bible is crystal clear. **Turn to Ephesians 2 page 1147**

Read verses 8-10

Over and over again, Old Testament and New, faith is the doorway to forgiveness.

All the way back in the Book of Genesis, Abraham, the father of the Jewish people was saved by faith. *And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.* (Genesis 15:6)

The Hebrew verb translated "accounted" *chashab* means "to think" or "to consider." God considered Abraham righteous on the basis of His faith and nothing else.

Turn to Romans 5 page 1107

Read verses 1, 2

According to the Bible the doorway to grace is faith alone. It's not a sacrament. It's not us turning from our sins so that God will accept us. It's simple, childlike faith.

The contrast in the Bible is always salvation by faith vs the false idea of salvation by works.

The Evil One, or Satan is described as a deceiver, a devourer, a liar, and a murderer. He

has nothing to do with the truth because there is no truth in him.

He has a goal. It's clear and well defined. Here it is: *But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.* (II Corinthians 4:3, 4)

The liar, the deceiver, the devourer, wants all glory for himself so he does all that can to blind the minds of people who have not believed so they don't understand the gospel.

His goal is to blind people to God's truth by encouraging them to think works, not faith.

So even though the Bible presents faith as the way to know God and to please God, Satan's goal is to always insert works.

That's why even within the church people struggle to define faith.

When Sandy and I were first married we attended a local church in Pennsylvania. It was in a small town and there were houses all around the church. I wanted to reach people with the gospel, I was new to Christianity, so I got a book on how to share your faith.

This book gave you a plan. You were supposed to tell people that they were sinners in need of a Savior. So far so good. You were supposed to talk about the death and resurrection of Christ. Good again. But then you were to tell them that the way of salvation was for them to ask Jesus into their heart.

There was a whole presentation about Jesus being on the outside and the only doorknob was on the inside. Jesus was knocking and they had to open the door of their heart and ask Him in by prayer.

Armed with that presentation, Sandy and I went out and knocked on doors. Amazingly there were people who let us in. And what was even more amazing was they let us go through the presentation. People prayed that prayer. Even one of my old high school teachers prayed that prayer.

Now I can't see inside a person's heart and I believe that when you use the Bible God can work in spite of our misstatements, but I walked out of people's homes with all kinds of questions.

Is someone going to heaven because they prayed a prayer? What about the whole “ask Jesus into your heart” thing? Wasn’t that taking Revelation 3:20 out of context? What does a person need to understand so that they can truly put their faith in Christ? What is saving faith?

Since I was new in the faith and I had a lot of questions, I went back to the pastor and the people at church and asked them. I was totally dismayed at their answers.

I mean, this should be Christianity 101. This should be something every Christian can speak to with clarity. There shouldn’t be a debate within Bible believing Christianity about the gospel. But there is.

And here’s why. First, Satan is alive and well and wants nothing more than to be an author of confusion. Sometimes that confusion extends into the church. Second, grace is so foreign to us that even though we read about it in the Bible, even though we can define it as God’s unearned favor, even though we know the little acrostic God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense, even though we sing, “Amazing grace how sweet the sound,” we still have a hard time processing it.

There’s nothing else that we experience in life that’s equal to grace. It’s so foreign to us because all through life we’ve been rewarded for performance and punished for lack of performance.

Now follow this verse. It’s a bit of a tongue twister but it’s so crucial to this whole discussion... *And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work.* (Romans 11:6)

When it comes to God’s grace, a little leaven, leavens the whole lump. Once you mix the slightest bit of human effort into grace it’s no longer grace.

That’s why I always try to speak with the utmost clarity about the gospel. That’s why I carefully word things from this pulpit. That’s why we have a precisely worded doctrinal statement. That’s why we try to be very careful about literature and tracts we use here at this church.

Salvation, being a part of God’s family, is by simple faith. That’s why you’ll never hear me say you need to make a commitment to Christ to be forgiven. I don’t call people to

invite Christ into their lives, give Jesus their heart, turn from their sins, or any one of a hundred other unclear messages that you hear in churches.

Christians are to turn from their sins, commit their lives, and follow Christ. Those are God's commands to those who are saved. As soon as you make those part of the salvation message you run the risk of people mistakenly believing that they have something to do with God's forgiveness. Once you insert works in grace, it's no longer grace.

This isn't a matter of semantics, it isn't a matter of personal opinion, it's a matter of the clarity of the gospel. That makes it a matter of heaven and hell.

- I. The Bible Gives Honest Answers To Questions From Honest Skeptics*
- II. The Bible Declares That Faith Is The One Way Into God's Kingdom*
- III. The Bible Teaches That Condemnation Is Based On One Thing: Disbelief*

Back to John chapter 3 page 1043

When you meet Jesus your world gets turned upside down. Your preconceived ideas about God, yourself, sin, and salvation get inverted.

So here's Nicodemus, a sincerely religious man, asking sincere questions. He had come to Jesus at night. Some people have guessed that he did that because he didn't want to be seen. I don't know if it was because there were so many crowds around Jesus in the daytime. We're not told.

What we do know is this, while most of the other Pharisees sat around and debated about Jesus' message with each other, Nicodemus went right to Jesus to find out the facts.

That's what we're doing this morning. That's what we always try to do. That's why we open the Bible and read it for ourselves. We want to hear from God and we want to see His truth in context.

Read verses 10-15

Nicodemus is eventually going to get it, but at this point he's still trying to put Jesus' teachings together in his own mind. He didn't have faith yet.

So Jesus says, “I’ve tried to make things simple for you. I’ve used simple pictures from everyday life. If the simple things are beyond you, how can you expect to understand the deep spiritual things?”

Now remember, Jesus is the key to understanding the Bible. The Bible that existed in Jesus’ day was what we know as the Old Testament so Jesus takes Nicodemus into the Jewish scriptures and the account of Moses and the serpent in the wilderness.

Nicodemus would have been very familiar with this narrative.

What was going on was this: God led the people of Israel out of Egypt but they refused to go into the Promised Land. God told that generation, “No problem. You can wander out in the desert and I’ll bring your kids in and give them the land.”

They had been wandering for 38 years at this point and God had supplied every need. The problem was the people complained about everything, even the food.

The desert was full of poisonous snakes and up until this point God protected them. But finally He took away His protection and the snakes started biting people.

Finally they cried out, “We’ve sinned,” and asked Moses to plead with God for protection again. On the surface, it seemed like the solution was to get rid of the snakes but God did something different.

He told Moses to make an image of a snake out of brass, put it on a pole and lift it up. Every one who looked at the snake would live. I don’t know what Moses or the people thought about God’s solution but Moses obeyed and most of the people looked.

Follow this: The only way a dieing Israelite could have life was if they looked at the representation of the thing that brought death. They couldn’t keep a set of rules or do some good work. They could only look.

They couldn’t look for anyone else. Each one had to look for himself. No one could make their own snake. They had to look at the one that God commanded Moses to make. And everyone who looked lived.

Here’s Jesus’ application: Only the people who look to Him live eternally. He’s the likeness of sinful humanity only He had no sin. The brass snake was lifted up on a pole. Jesus would be lifted up on a cross.

The Israelites had to believe. They could have refused. They could have said, “That’s the craziest thing I’ve ever heard of, I’m not going to look.”

In just the same way, *whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.*

For... (verse 16) this is an explanation. **Read verse 16-18**

Here’s what Jesus wanted Nicodemus to know. Here’s what Jesus wants every one of us to know. The world stands condemned. We’ve all been bitten by the poisonous serpent of sin.

Unless we look to Jesus Christ and His death, burial, and resurrection, there’s no hope.

Nicodemus believed Jesus’ words and he walked away from that encounter with new life from God.

Saving faith isn’t as mysterious as we sometimes make it out to be.

In the late 1800’s Charles Haddon Spurgeon became one of the most powerful preachers in England. Listen to how he met Jesus.

While under the concern of soul, I resolved that I would attend all the places of worship in the town where I lived, in order that I might find out the way of salvation. I was willing to do anything, and be anything, if God would only, forgive my sin. I set off, determined to go round to all the chapels, and I did go to every place of worship; but for a long time I went in vain. I do not, however, blame the ministers. I knew it was said *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved*, but I did not know what it was to believe on Christ.

I sometimes think I might have been in darkness and despair until now had it not been for the goodness of God in sending a snowstorm, one Sunday morning, while I was going to a certain place of worship. When I could go no further, I turned down a side street, and came to a little Primitive Methodist Chapel. In that chapel there may have been a dozen or fifteen people.... The minister did not come that morning; he was snowed up, I suppose. At last, a very thin-looking man, a shoemaker, or tailor, or something of that sort, went up into the pulpit to preach. Now, it is well that preachers

should be instructed, but this man was really unlearned. He was obliged to stick to his text for the simple reason that he had little else to say.

The text was Isaiah 45:22 *Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else.*

He did not even pronounce the words rightly, but that did not matter. There was, I thought, a glimpse of hope for me in that text. The preacher began thus: "My dear friends, this is a very simple text indeed It says, 'Look.' Now lookin' don't take a deal of pain. It ain't liftin' your foot or your finger; it is just, 'Look.' Well, a man needn't go to College to learn to look. You may be the biggest fool, and yet you can look. A man needn't be worth a thousand a year to be able to look. Anyone can look; even a child can look. But then the text says, 'Look unto Me.' "Ay!" said he, in broad Essex, "many of ye are lookin' to yourselves, but it's no use lookin' there. You'll never find any comfort in yourselves. Some look to God the Father. No, look to Him by-and-by. Jesus Christ says, 'Look unto Me.' Some of ye say, 'We must wait for the Spirit's workin'.' You have no business with that just now. Look to Christ. The text says, 'Look unto Me.'"

Then the good man followed up his text in this way; "Look unto Me; I am sweatin' great drops of blood. Look unto Me; I'm hangin' on the cross. Look unto Me; I am dead and buried. Look unto Me; I rise again. Look unto Me; I ascend to Heaven. Look unto Me; I am sittin' at the Father's right hand. O poor sinner, look unto Me! Look unto Me!"

When he had gone to about that length, and managed to spin out ten minutes or so, he was at the end of his tether. Then he looked at me under the gallery, and I daresay, with so few present, he knew me to be a stranger. Just fixing his eyes on me, as if he knew all my heart, he said, "Young man, you look very miserable." Well, I did, but I had not been accustomed to have remarks made from the pulpit on my personal appearance before. However, it was a good blow, struck right home.

He continued, "and you always will be miserable- miserable in life, and miserable in death-if you don't obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved."

Then, lifting up his hands, he shouted, as only a Primitive Methodist could do, "Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! Look! You have nothin' to do but look and live."

I saw at once the way of salvation. Like when the brazen serpent was lifted up, the people only looked and were healed, so it was with me. I had been waiting to do fifty

things. Oh! I looked until I could almost have looked my eyes away. There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun; and I could have risen that instant, and sung with the most enthusiastic of them, of the precious blood of Christ, and the simple faith which looks alone to Him. Oh, that somebody had told me this before, "Trust Christ and you shall be saved."