



**Series:** The Gospel of John...For God so Loved

**Date:** September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022

**Speaker:** Jake Greer, Executive Pastor

**Text:** John 3:1-21

**Title:** True Life Starts Now

Good morning, Mercy family!

Hey, you may not know this, but Mercy recently celebrated its 7th birthday! Praise God for all He's done these last seven years and let's ask Him to do far more than we could ask or imagine in the next 7.

Well, both me and my wife share the same birthday month with Mercy. Meredith's birthday is actually tomorrow and mine was last weekend. Birthdays are a great time to reflect on all that has happened in the last year and to dream and pray over all that you hope to see in the next year.

It's kind of an interesting thing that we celebrate the day we were born. There's something special about the newness of life that comes when a baby is born. Even though our life begins before birth, the day of our birth marks a key moment where we leave our momma's belly and face the world outside in a new and unique way.

Well in today's story, we're going to be talking a little bit about birth and life, but specifically Rebirth and New Life.

And my hope is to show you this simple truth.

That

**True Life must first be New Life**

Let's pray!

Well today we're picking up in chapter 3 of John's book. As a quick recap, John has written this book so that people may believe that Jesus is the Messiah and that this belief might lead to life in His name. After John finishes his introduction to the book, he jumps right into Jesus' ministry, and he is going to lay out in the next several chapters Jesus confronting the various societal and institutional religious pillars of His day. All of this is to show us that Jesus is bringing about something new. Last week, we heard from Pastor Josh about the two





stories of Jesus showing glimpses of how He is upending the religiosity of the people of this time. John shows us in the two stories of chapter 2 Jesus is bringing about a new way of being cleaned or purified and a new way of worshiping God.

And then John ends chapter 2, with something quite powerful that sets up this next story. Look with me at chapter 2, picking up in verse 23

23 While he was in Jerusalem during the Passover Festival, many believed in his name when they saw the signs he was doing. 24 Jesus, however, would not entrust himself to them, since he knew them all 25 and because he did not need anyone to testify about man; for he himself knew what was in man.

Our story today begins with a new character on the scene. And we will in fact see that Jesus knew what was in this man.

And here's why I mention this church.

As we dig into this word today, as we learn about late night conversation between two Rabbis, and as we unpack what might be one of the most commonly known verses in all of the Bible, I want us to understand that HE KNOWS WHAT IS INSIDE OF MAN. That means, He knows what is inside of YOU. He knows what is inside of ME. Now that thought might scare you

a little bit. Right? It should! Think about it! Imagine if we could see your thoughts. Imagine if we knew all of your motivations. Imagine if we saw your fantasies. This is saying that JESUS KNOWS THESE THINGS.

Well, here's the thing friend, the fact that Jesus knows what's inside of you this morning can be terrifying. But, when you combine this fact with a knowledge of WHO this Jesus guy is and WHAT He's actually like, you can have deep deep confidence in His abounding love. The fact that God knows you, yet He still wants you is proof that God is love! Let's get into this text and see what I mean.

Picking up in verse 1

1 There was a man from the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This man came to him at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform these signs you do unless God were with him."

Alright, so I want you to notice a few keys things that help to set the stage for this dialogue.

1. Nicodemus is a pharisee
2. Nicodemus is a ruler of the Jews



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And

3. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night.

I'm pointing these things out because it's going to help shape our understanding of this conversation. We need to know a few things about who Nicodemus is before we can understand Jesus' responses to him. And I think the more we get to know Nicodemus, the more we may be able to identify with him and relate to his journey.

So, what's the significance of these three things? Well, first of all, Nicodemus was a pharisee, meaning, he was a religious expert. He knew the Law and Prophets most likely better than almost anyone around him. Others would have looked to him as an authority- a teacher.

Secondly, we know that he was a ruler among the Jews. This most likely meant that he was a member of the Sanhedrin<sup>1</sup> and thus would have had significant political influence and power over his society.

Which means, that when Jesus showed up wreaking havoc in the temple market, when word got out that some Galileans were talking to one another about a man from Nazareth who

was the Son of God, and when there were these trending stories, stories of signs, miraculous wonders, being performed by this unknown man who's being called the Messiah, Nicodemus would have heard about this.

Now, he wouldn't have just heard about this and then moved on without batting an eye. No! Listen! He would have felt something upon hearing these things.

Have you ever heard about somebody and then felt something in your core in response? Maybe threatened by their influence? Maybe curious about who they actually are? Maybe suspicious of their real motives?

Well, no doubt, Nicodemus may have felt some of these same things. Maybe that's why he came to Jesus at night. Under the cover of the darkness and likely after finishing his "shift" at the local synagogue, he sneaks into a meeting with this man he'd been hearing about. He needed to see for himself what this Jesus was all about. I mean, he at least knew that Jesus was somehow from God, he saw the evidence. But he needed to investigate further.

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas Mangum and Vasile Babota, "[Sanhedrin](#)," ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).



Maybe that's you today. You're here because you want to see what this Jesus is all about? Maybe you too are powerful and have significant influence. Maybe you often find yourself being the "smart one" in the room. Maybe you can relate to Nicodemus and this strange mix of curiosity, courage, and timidity<sup>2</sup> that he displays.

Just as Jesus knew what was in Nicodemus as he approached him in the evening, He too knows what is in you as you approached Mercy this morning, as you clicked on this website or YouTube video. And we're going to hear from Jesus in just a minute. We're going to hear WHY he came. So regardless of what He can see inside of you right now and how that makes you feel, sit tight, He's got something for you!

Now, here's why I think John, our author, is including this discourse between Jesus and Nicodemus in this book. Remember, John's goal is that the readers of his writing, would come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah- that Jesus is God! And he inserts, what is most likely, just snippets of a conversation that takes place between Jesus, this mysterious Rabbi who is gaining a following, establishing signs of His power, and speaking very authoritatively about this NEW thing

that's happening, and Nicodemus, this other Rabbi, who's likely a rich, powerful, and influential man himself.

I think John is including this because his original readers, much like us, often thought that knowledge, or power, or wealth, or gender, or political party determines our ability to SEE GOD! To KNOW GOD! Like, God is only interested in the people that our society platforms as important. God is too high and lofty to be interested in the lowly or "losers" of society. The have-nots. (LAUGH) But NOT this God! Just wait, you'll see.

Look with me again at the text, picking up in verse 3

3 Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." 4 "How can anyone be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked him. "Can he enter his mother's womb a second time and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly I tell you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be amazed that I told you that you must be born again. 8 The wind blows where it pleases, and you hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. So, it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

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<sup>2</sup> Gary M. Burge, *John*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 113.



9 “How can these things be?” asked Nicodemus. 10 “Are you a teacher of Israel and don’t know these things?” Jesus replied. 11 “Truly I tell you, we speak what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but you do not accept our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you don’t believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven—the Son of Man.”<sup>3</sup>

Alright, there’s a lot of stuff in this dialogue here. Let me try to explain and summarize this for you.

So, Nicodemus, this Pharisee and ruler is curious to investigate more about who this Jesus guy actually is. He comes to him by night and acknowledges that Jesus too is a respectable Rabbi and that it’s clear that he has God with him. Jesus, in true Jesus-form, replies with a deep spiritual truth that sends Nicodemus into an intellectual quandary.

Jesus is saying that what He’s here to do, this new thing that the Messiah is bringing about, the kingdom of God, cannot be seen unless someone is born again. So, what Nicodemus brings to the table in the way of spiritual knowledge, intellectual understanding of the scriptures, and even a track

record of strong integrity, purity, and self-control isn’t enough! He’s saying that the only way to see (verse 3) and the only way to enter (verse 5) God’s kingdom is to start over. What must one do to see what God is actually doing, to enter God’s kingdom? One must be born again, or another way of understanding John’s word usage, is to be born from above. Or “born of the Spirit” (v. 6). Even the act that precedes truly seeing and entering God’s kingdom, this being born from above, requires God’s movement.

And the poetic point of this whole thing is that Nicodemus, this authoritative, learned, and powerful man, doesn’t even understand what Jesus is saying. Jesus is saying that to really understand, one must start over. And this starting over isn’t something we can just do on our own. We need to be born of the Spirit. Do you see that?

And that brings me to my first point.

### Spiritual Rebirth precedes New Life

When we are born into this world, we begin dying. From the second that you were born, your physical life began to move closer to its natural end. I’m not trying to be morbid or even

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<sup>3</sup> [Christian Standard Bible](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2020), Jn 3:3–21.



somber. But it's just a fact of life. Like the old Benjamin Franklin quote, "In this world, nothing is certain but death and taxes." So, whether you live to be 100 years old or tomorrow is your last day on this earth, you will die. I will die.

So, when the book of John promises life forevermore, we should all be intrigued. If there's a way that we can escape death, then shouldn't we be curious to learn more, shouldn't we be captivated? Isn't this worth trading anything for?

And that's where I think most of us get stuck. We, like Nicodemus, think of life as physical. The idea of entering as a grown man or woman back into our mother's womb again, seems preposterous (and honestly, gross). But Jesus isn't speaking of this physical life. Jesus didn't primarily come to save us from physical death. No, what Jesus is telling Nicodemus, what John is beginning to unveil through this story, is that in order to even see God's kingdom, to just glimpse it, we need to be reborn. To be born from above.

Without a spiritual rebirth, there can be no spiritual life! And friends, without a spiritual life, all that's left is to walk in spiritual death.

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<sup>4</sup> [Christian Standard Bible](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2020), Jn 3:16–22.

### Spiritual Rebirth precedes New Life

So, Jake, how do we get this New Life? Or another way of asking this question is what I imagine Nicodemus would have asked if he had actually understood who he was sharing a conversation with.

"Jesus, what must I do to be born from above?" What must I do to get new life?

Well, Jesus, being the good, kind, compassionate, and patient man who knew what was inside of Nicodemus, tells him.

Look with me at verse 14

14 "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. <sup>4</sup>

Here Jesus is referencing a story from Israel's history that would have been very well known to Nicodemus. Here's the gist. Back in the book of Numbers in chapter 21, there's a story of God's people being disgruntled towards God. Classic right! Well, here's what was going on. God had rescued the



Israelites from their Egyptian slave owners and He had promised them a new land that would be different than anything they'd ever experienced as a people. Well, before they got to this lush and bountiful land, they had to walk through the wilderness. And not too dissimilar to us, when we walk through valleys and the wildernesses in our lives, the people started to complain. They complained against God and against their leader. And God sent snakes into their camp as a punishment for their ingratitude and blasphemy. These snakes were biting people and many people were dying. So, as we tend to do when we actually recognize our NEED, the Israelites cried out for help. They asked for mercy from God and God delivered that mercy. God told Moses, their leader, to build a serpent from bronze and set it on a pole. Then, anyone who was bitten by one of these poisonous snakes, could look up to the raised bronze snake and they would live.<sup>5</sup>

So, when Jesus tells Nicodemus that just as Moses lifted up the snake, so also the Son of Man would be lifted up, referring to Himself getting up on the cross that comes at the end of this book, he's answering the question that's never explicitly asked by Nicodemus - our question.

What must I do to be born from above? I want to see the kingdom. I want to enter the kingdom. What must I do Jesus?

"Look to me and believe". And church, this is such good news for us.

We have the answer to the problem of our impending death.

What must I do to get new life?

"Believe!!!"

This brings me to my second point,

**New life comes from belief**

Do you see that?

It's like Jesus is saying, "Nicodemus, my child. You don't get it because you're looking at it the wrong way. You don't need to be physically reborn. You need to be spiritually reborn. All of your accomplishments, all of your knowledge, all of your striving. They're not enough. You must be born of the Spirit. And I must do this work in you. And the new life, the eternal life, that I have come to bring you, only comes through belief. Belief in me! I am the greater bronze snake. When I'm raised up for your sins, for your shortcomings, for all that you've

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<sup>5</sup> Numbers 21:4-9



done wrong, look to me. I don't condemn you; I offer forgiveness. Do you believe me? Would you just believe in me?"

Friend, if you're in this room and you've never believed, you've doubted your whole life, but like Nicodemus, you're a mixed bag of curiosity and timidity. It's okay! He knows what's inside of man. He knows what is inside of you. All you have to do is look up and believe. It's a simple step, but it takes courage. Listen, I get it. This stuff sounds insane. You might be like, "Preacher, this is crazy! You're up here talking about snakes and poles and something as simple as belief is going to get me eternal life! What's the catch?"

No catch! The gospel is simple and incredible news. God loves you! He took on your punishment on that cross, defeated the enemy when He rose from the dead, and offers your life with nothing more from you than belief.

### New life comes from belief

Let's keep going in the text.

Picking back up in John 3:16. One of the most commonly known verses in our time. Here it is.

16 For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Anyone who believes in him is not condemned, but anyone who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God. 19 This is the judgment: The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. 20 For everyone who does evil hates the light and avoids it, so that his deeds may not be exposed. 21 But anyone who lives by the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be shown to be accomplished by God."

Listen church, this passage of scripture is so familiar that I think we've lost our awe for the simplistic and glorious hope found in these sentences. And I think that's a shame. I think it's a shame because we can miss so many things when we read the scriptures as just words on a page that we think of as old, repetitive, contradictory, irrelevant, boring, difficult to understand, or even wrong.

Listen to these all-too-common words. Let them wash over you and well up in your soul a new song, a new hope, a new life.





6 “For God loved the world in this way, (or as this sermon series is entitled, for God so loved) He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Anyone who believes in him is not condemned, but anyone who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God.

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Here’s what I want us to see from this final section of our text.

### New life begins now

You see, many of us have been reading, or perhaps remembering, John 3:16 incorrectly. We’ve been in church long enough to hear that

“Jesus brings life”

“Eternal life is found only in Him”

“That the wage of sin is death, but the gift of God is life”

Or

“That God so loved the world that he gave his only son. That whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.”

But, for many of us in this room, and oftentimes for me. We tend to read this with our own little spin.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him will not go to hell but will go to heaven.”

I mean, we know that this isn’t how the verse reads. But isn’t this how we often read it? Especially those of us who grew up in church.

I think we do this for one of two reasons.

One, we are like Nicodemus, and we think of God’s kingdom, of eternal life, as something that isn’t real until it’s physical. So, the idea of heaven we’re okay with because it’s real, yes, but it’s not really real until we die. That’s when God’s kingdom will matter.

Or maybe it’s the second reason. We aren’t interested in the life that the Spirit offers. Do we want to go to heaven? Of course! Who doesn’t. But we’re only interested in a belief that changes our destination after physical death, not our experience now of this physical life. John addresses this person in verse 19

19 This is the judgment: The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light because their



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deeds were evil. 20 For everyone who does evil hates the light and avoids it, so that his deeds may not be exposed.

If you're sitting in this room and you want the pleasures of the darkness but not the presence of the Light. You want to live freely in your evil deeds now but still go to heaven when you die, I'm here to tell you, THAT DEAL DOESN'T EXIST.

"But Jake, I thought you've said that Jesus offered new life, eternal life, to sinners who are walking in the evil deeds of the darkness?"

Absolutely!! He does!

But listen, Jesus' offer of new life isn't just to meet the pre-reqs for getting into heaven.

Yes, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection brings us the "rightness" we need in order to enter into His kingdom, but it doesn't stop there. Eternal life isn't just about heaven and getting into God's future kingdom.

Those who are Spiritually reborn into new life through genuine belief, don't keep on sinning. At least not like they did before belief. The apostle Paul who writes several books of the Bible, teaches us that there is no condemnation for those that are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1) AND that the Spirit of

God dwells in those that are in Christ (8:9) making them dead to sin and alive to walk in righteousness and Godly obedience (Rom 6, Gal 6, 2 Cor 5). This means that when we truly believe in Jesus, His Spirit comes into us and dwells inside of us, and as His Spirit lives inside of us, we are continually being transformed more and more into Jesus' likeness - into perfection. This won't equate to a sinless life. Christians sin all of the time. I sin all of the time. No! We won't be perfect like Jesus. But this New Life WILL lead to more brokenness over sins, it will lead to more awareness of our need for God, and it will lead to growth - spiritual growth!

So, friend, if you're sitting here and wanting to live in darkness, gratifying the things that your sinful flesh desires, and you would say that you have believed in Jesus, I'm here to tell you that TRUE belief leads to new life NOW.

We must stop!!

We must stop choosing death!

When we choose to deceive, we choose death.

When we choose to gossip, we choose death.

When we choose pornography, we choose death.

When we choose to not forgive, we choose death.

When we choose to pursue wealth over righteousness, death.

When we choose to cheat on our spouse, death.

When we choose to mistreat others because of their skin color, death.



When we choose to look at our bodies with hatred for what's not right, we choose death.

When we choose to medicate our hurt with alcohol, food, exercise, sleep, or with hours and hours of mindless numbing on Netflix or Instagram, we choose death church!

Listen, if you're in this room and you're not broken over your sinful deeds, then you might not have the Spirit of God in you. You might not actually believe. You're dead. You're walking in death.

Verse 18

18 but anyone who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God.

20 "For everyone who does evil hates the light and avoids it, so that his deeds may not be exposed.

Is that you?

Praise be to God, that the author of life doesn't come to condemn but to forgive- to save! He came to save us from our sins. And this saving is the beginning of True Life!

True Life Must First Be New Life

You know I've been chewing on this idea for the last two months. I knew that I was going to get to preach John 3:16! I mean any amateur preacher should love such a slam dunk text! Just get up there and give em that old gospel! Eternal life! Who wants it?

But there's something about this text that I just can't shake. When I think about my life and how I make decisions. How my attitude is affected by my circumstances. How my desires are often first for my pleasure and my flourishing. And when I think about you. I think about the people of my church and the things that I think they struggle with.

When I think on these things, I can't shake this idea:

What would it be like if Mercy Church, if the Jesus-followers who are part of Mercy Church, actually lived like this promise of eternal life is a promise for life now. Not just a promise for life after physical death, but a promise for life now. Life on September 25th, 2022. Life here! Life here in Charlotte. In our homes, in our jobs, in our friend groups, in our families.

This is the promise church! When Jesus says that He offers eternal life, when John tells us he wants us to have life in his name, when the scriptures tell us that "whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life," these words are talking about life now.



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And this is what that eternal life looks like

- An abundant life - John 10:10 I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance
- A transformative life - Rom. 12:2 Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.
- A desire-quenching life -John 6:35 “I am the bread of life,” Jesus told them. “No one who comes to me will ever be hungry, and no one who believes in me will ever be thirsty again.”
- A life full of goodness and love - Psalm 23:6 Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord as long as I live.
- A life that overflows - John 7:38 “The one who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, will have streams of living water flow from deep within him.”
- A life that Christ is living in us - Galatians 2:20. I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live

by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Church, this is the promise that Jesus offers. He’s come so that we may have life. Eternal life. New life. True life!

But true life must first be new life.

So, wherever you’re at today, He knows what’s inside of you. However, these words land on your soul, know this my friend.

Every decision we make, either moves us towards deeper life or death. We can choose to live, to fix our eyes on Jesus, and walk in the newness of life that He freely gives those who believe in Him, those who look up at Him hanging on the cross and believe, trust.

Or we can choose death. We can continue to walk in darkness. We can continue to do evil and to hide from the light.

The invitation is to ALL. Which will you choose?

Listen church, as we close out this time in God’s Word, I want us to respond. I believe that God is doing work in this room. Listen, HE KNOWS WHAT’S INSIDE OF YOU. He’s knows! And He doesn’t condemn you. Whether you’re a lover of Jesus who is sitting in this room struggling with some type of sin that no



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one knows about, or you have never believed in Jesus, at least not truly, HE FORGIVES, HE SAVES!

Later in your Bible there's a book called 1 John, where our same author writes these words.

**8** If we say, "We have no sin," we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. **9** If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. | John 1:8-9

So, here's what we're going to do. The band is going to come up here and start to play "Amazing Grace". A wonderful song to bring us up from the depths of brokenness into worship, gratitude, and newness of life.

As they're playing this song, I want you to use this time for confession. You can pray in your seat. You can kneel down in the aisle. You can come to the front or the back. But confess where you've been choosing to walk in death and receive forgiveness. We're all sinners. Anyone who says they aren't deceiving themselves. So, let's confess together!