

WHAT'S NEW ABOUT THE NEW COVENANT: A COVENANT OF LOVE
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John 3:1-17

For God so loved the world... I don't even have to complete that verse, do I? You know it. You're saying it in your heads right now. It's written on our hearts as part of our communal memory. Even people who don't know the Bible are familiar with that verse—probably from watching football games. We can all fill in the rest of the verse.

Those words are more than just a slogan. They're more than just a Christian cliché. That verse, I will argue, is the culmination of the story of our faith. It is the culmination of a story that has been building for thousands of years. This verse tells us that God loves this world so much that God was willing to sacrifice God's son so that those who believe in God—and God's son—would find salvation.

Now, although we're all very familiar with the verse, I doubt that many people outside the church could fill you in on its context. I mean, the verse doesn't just exist in isolation. It's part of a larger story, a story that revolves around this man named Nicodemus.

Nicodemus is introduced to us as a Pharisee and as a leader of the Jews. As a Pharisee, he would be part of a religious movement that believed that strict adherence to the law was the key to salvation. They're not incorrect on that. The law is a gift from God. Nicodemus was also a member of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was like the town council for Jerusalem, but with no real political power because of the Roman occupation.

As a Pharisee and as a leader of the Jews, Nicodemus was undoubtedly aware of Jesus. He was plugged in; he knew what was going on. We have nothing against Nicodemus here. He was, by all accounts, a good person. However, we read that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night and night is very interesting because it raises a lot of questions. Why night? Why not just confront him in the daytime? Is Nicodemus hiding something? Is he on some special mission? Does he not want to be seen? Is he afraid that if the others see him, they'll know that he's a Jesus sympathizer? And in fact, later on, Nicodemus would defend Jesus in front of the Sanhedrin, saying we need to find out more about this man. And then, at Jesus' death, Nicodemus is the one who brought spices to anoint the body. Joseph of Arimathea provided the tomb and Nicodemus brought the spices.

But here in chapter 3, Nicodemus comes to Jesus under the cover of night, and in the Gospel of John, night is a very loaded word. In John's cosmology, the cosmos are separated into two parts—light and dark. Light represents life and truth and

freedom and heaven. Light represents what is above; it represents eternal life that comes from a complete understanding of God.

Darkness, on the other hand, represents death, falsehood, hatred, pain—anything that is below, which includes the Earth. Darkness indicates a less than complete understanding of God.

In this gospel, we find a running theme of light and darkness, Nicodemus comes at night not just to avoid being seen. It also points to his failing to fully understand God or Jesus. He comes in the darkness of his understanding. Earlier, in the first chapter of John, John tells us, *the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it*. John is reminding us that even though we know how the story turns out, that the light always succeeds.

John's readers know how this story ends. They know about Jesus' crucifixion. They know about the resurrection. They know already that the darkness does not defeat the light. But by coming at night, John is telling us that Nicodemus simply doesn't get it. His life is a life in the darkness.

As I said, he's a good person. Nothing wrong with Nicodemus. In fact, in later years, the church has recognized him as a saint. But, here at this place and time, he doesn't understand. It is ironic because Nicodemus, of all people, should understand. He was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. He would have been educated in the faith. He was a person who should know these things. He is as qualified as anyone, but he just can't pull the parts together. He has good intentions, but he's unable to see the big picture.

So, we are told this, Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. And then we are presented with this confusingly disjointed conversation. If you didn't understand what was going on in the middle of this reading, that is okay. I don't really get it either. I could see you glazing over. I was glazing over myself. It's just too complicated with all the mentions of flesh and spirit and wind and water.

The reading starts out with Nicodemus offering a sincere statement of respect for Jesus. He addresses Jesus as *rabbi*. He says, *We know that you are a teacher who has come from God*. Nicodemus recognizes Jesus' credentials. He says, *For no one can do these signs that you do, apart from the presence of God*. He recognizes Jesus' power, and he knows that what Jesus does is a sign of God.

But Jesus isn't very helpful here because he responds to Nicodemus talking about the *presence of God* by saying, *No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above*. And this word "from above" in Greek is the word *anōthen*. But it can also mean "again" or "anew." And while Jesus clearly means "from above," Nicodemus understands him to mean "again." And so, we continue this disjointed conversation with Nicodemus saying, *How can somebody be born again*

(not “from above”) *after having grown old? How do they enter their mother's womb a second time? This makes no sense at all.* And it's clear, once again, that Nicodemus doesn't get it. Not only does he not understand what Jesus is saying, he doesn't understand Jesus at all. Yes, he's a rabbi. Yes, he's a teacher, but that's about as far as Nicodemus' understanding goes. This conversation continues with Jesus talking about the kingdom, the water, the spirit, the flesh, the wind. But we're skipping over all that.

Then we come to verse 16. The conversation reaches its peak when Jesus proclaims, *For God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* These words are the culmination of the story of our faith. Everything that has happened before peaks right here in these powerful words. And to understand the meaning of these words I want to go back to the very beginning, to Genesis.

The first words of our Bible are, *In the beginning, God created.* And it is no coincidence that the Gospel of John begins with the same words saying, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God.* John is making this very pointed connection between the beginning and the creation and the fact that Jesus was present at the creation.

God created the heavens and the earth. God brought life into the earth which included human beings whom God placed in this idyllic setting where they might live in a perfect relationship with God. And for a while, they did, until they decided they wanted to be something else. They wanted to be like gods themselves. And they sinned. And because of this sin, they were cast out of the garden. This was not a place where sinners could live.

The Bible follows the story of their descendants until we come to a man and a woman named Abraham and Sarah. The relationship that God had with humanity had been broken, but now God attempts to reset the relationship. This time God focuses on these two individuals and offers them this agreement: I will be your God, if you will be my people. And I will give you numerous descendants—as numerous as the stars in the sky.

Now that was problematic because we know that Abraham and Sarah were well past their childbearing years. But they agree because they understand. They don't know this God all that well, but they understand in a way that Nicodemus, with all of his knowledge, could not. They agree to follow God to a new land, and they establish their lives there.

But then, in Chapter 15 of Genesis, Abraham becomes anxious because God had promised all these descendants and he and Sarah were still very childless. Abraham approaches God with his concerns. He does so not out of a lack faith, but out of a powerful faith. He goes to God and inquires how is this going to work out. God says

to Abraham, *Let us make a covenant*. There has been no covenant until this. It's just been an agreement.

Now, I want to spend some time digging into this word covenant because it is so crucial to our understanding of our relationship with God.

So, what is a covenant? A covenant is an agreement. You could say that it is a contract but that is not quite accurate. For one thing, a contract is *obligatory*. When you enter into a contract, both sides are obligated to the terms of the contract. Covenant is different. A covenant is *promissory*. It points to something that both sides wish to achieve.

A contract is also different because a contract is between equal parties. Think about your contract with your bank over your mortgage. I mean, it feels like the bank is far more powerful than you, but they're not because you both have rights—rights that balance the playing field.

A covenant, on the other hand, is between parties of unequal power. Usually, one party has immense power and the other has very little power. And we find covenants in these ancient days that are initiated by kings. Now we today don't really understand the power that a king might have like they did in this day. A king had absolute power over his kingdom and his people and the land and the wealth and the armies. The king owned everything unless the king chose to give it away. Think about the pharaohs who, when they died, had their slaves killed and buried with them, so they might serve the king in the afterlife. That's power. To take lives for your own purpose. That's what these people were dealing with in these days—these kings with their ultimate authority.

But if a king wanted something, then they might enter into a covenant. Let's say that a king had a subject who was especially faithful, and the king wanted to reward them with land of their own. The king would enter into a covenant that might say something like, I will give you this land but you will have to give me fifty percent of your profit and you will provide me with two dozen men to fight in my army and you will show allegiance to me and to no other king.

The ritual of cutting a covenant would involve an animal—a cow or a goat. This animal would be sliced in half and those halves would be laid out on the ground. The lesser party to the covenant would walk through the bloody mess of animal gut as a reminder that if they should break their side of the covenant, then this is how they would end up. Their life would be forfeited.

Now, back to chapter 15 of Genesis. Abraham is anxious about having children, and God says, *Alright, let's cut a covenant*. And God tells Abraham to get a heifer, a goat, a ram, a dove, and a pigeon, and to cut them in half and lay them out for the ritual. And Abraham does this, but he does it a little early in the day and God's not

there. And when you've got these carcasses lying on the ground, it's going to attract scavenger birds. Abraham spent the rest of the day fighting off the birds.

When it was dark, Abraham went to sleep. And in his sleep, he has a dream, and in the dream a vision. And in this vision, God appears.

What does God look like? God looks like a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch. Smoke and fire. We'll see this image later on when the Israelites are traveling through the wilderness. God leads the people by day as a column of smoke and at night as a pillar of fire. That is how God appears to Abraham in this vision. And what God does changes everything for the rest of time. It changes our relationship with God. Because God, as smoke and fire, moves through the halves of the severed animals himself. Not Abraham. It is God who takes on the weight of covenant breaking. God switches roles with Abraham and with us.

God will never break a covenant, but we will. And when a covenant is broken, a price must be paid, and that price is a life. And God places God's self in that life. But God can't die. So, God comes to us as Jesus, who could die, who could pay the price of breaking the covenant, so that we might have life eternal. God switches roles with us at the very beginning. As one scholar put it, by doing this, God sets up the inevitable event of the crucifixion where Christ is lifted up and executed—a life given, a life sacrificed. The covenant that God made with Abraham remains in effect, but Jesus becomes the new covenant—the sacrifice, the gift, the gift of love.

Two weeks ago, we looked at the story of the Last Supper. Jesus stood there at the table with the bread and the wine, and said, *This is my body. This is my blood. This is the new covenant.* Jesus identified himself as the sacrifice that had to be made. The New Covenant is a covenant steeped in sacrifice and love. It is indeed a gift to us for all time, a gift by which we might be able to enter into the kingdom, a gift by which we might be able to achieve salvation, a gift of eternal life.

So, in the season of Thanksgiving, if you were looking around for something to be thankful for, this is it right here—God's love for us, a love which was established thousands of years ago, not just at Creation, but in the ongoing renewal of the covenants where God seeks nothing more than to have a relationship with us, even though we turn away time after time after time and break the covenant. God calls us back, invites us back, and finally says, "I've got to do this myself" and comes to us as the son whose life is sacrificed to pay the price of that covenant made so many generations before.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.