

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

[A Nutshell]

*“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son,
that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*

You’ve heard that passage before.

Chances are you memorized it in Confirmation class.

Maybe found it bookmarked in a hotel Bible.

Probably seen its reference, John 3:16, on a tattoo or at a sporting event.

John 3:16 is sometimes called “The Gospel in a Nutshell.”

Because it contains the basics in 24 words—

not *quite* the seven we seek on Wednesday nights.

They’re familiar words.

So familiar that we may have forgotten the context in which they were spoken.

[In the Darkness]

It was night—*darkness* was all around.

A shadowy figure made his way across the now quiet street.

He wasn’t about to be seen seeking help in broad daylight.

For he was Nicodemus—a respected teacher of Israel!

He had been schooled in the Scriptures for decades.

He could recite the entirety of Genesis through Micah without error.

He probably even memorized many sayings of the great rabbis, Shammai and Hillel.

But there had come an even greater Teacher,

Who was performing... wonders.

Wonders akin to what Moses himself had done millennia ago!

But this Teacher was... odd.

He had just made a mess of the Temple,

and apparently spent time in the desert with his locust-eating cousin, John the Baptist.

Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, could not be seen seeking out such a... Person.

So Nick came by night, when no one could see him, to meet this Jesus from Nazareth.

And Jesus told him that one had to be *“born again of water and the Spirit.”*

What? *“How can a man be born again when he is old?*

Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

And for a fair question, Jesus chastises him:

“Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?”

The fact is, Nicodemus, for all his knowledge, did *not* understand these things.

To Nicodemus, the Scriptures were only Law—reminders of sin.
Sure, they laid out the right way to live,
But no man could do so perfectly—not Shammai or Hillel or even Moses.
But there was something strange about this ‘Teacher.’
Nicodemus did not know it yet, but this ‘Teacher’ was also his Savior.
All the Scriptures shined a light to this Jesus.
But Nicodemus was still in the darkness.

[We Prefer Darkness]

It can be tempting for us, who live after God was revealed in Jesus Christ,
to look back and shake our heads:

“How could they not understand God’s plan? It was plain from the beginning!”
We should not be so quick to scoff, because we often do far worse.

We should read the Scriptures to see Jesus.

Instead, consider how many superstitiously scour the Scriptures for “signs,”
trying to predict the end of the world,
or selfishly inserting our own current events into specific passages of Scripture.
Perhaps even for worldly gain.

Seeing ourselves in Scripture instead of Jesus.

Perhaps that sin isn’t so common to us Lutherans.

Maybe we treat the Scriptures as some mystical collection of wisdom,
reading the Psalms or Proverbs for some ‘hidden truth’ for our lives,
as if they were some compendium of horoscopes,
or a magic lamp to rub when we want a comfortable god to grant us three wishes.

Seeing ourselves in Scripture instead of Jesus.

Or perhaps our abuse of the Scriptures comes more insidiously.

Perhaps we neglect the Third Commandment about keeping the Sabbath Day holy:

*We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word,
But hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.*

Perhaps we’d rather sleep in than worship—either online or in person.

Like Nicodemus, we’re in the *darkness*—and we put ourselves there!

[Universal Darkness]

We aren’t the first to prefer *darkness* to *light*.

Throughout history, God’s people have consistently made that same poor decision
when left to their own devices.

Mankind universally prefers *darkness*.

Today’s Old Testament reading, Numbers 21, is a prime example.

God sent Moses to lead his people out of the *darkness* of slavery in Egypt
Into the *light* of the Promised Land.

But that required traveling through the desert and among dangerous nations.

The people grumbled:

“You brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness!”

They would’ve rather been in the *darkness* of slavery than the *light* of freedom
Because it was uncomfortable and inconvenient.

For their grumbling, God sent “fiery serpents” (that’s ancient Hebrew for “venomous snakes”).
And people were dying.

So the people went to Moses:

*“We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you!
Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us!”*

So Moses does.

God instructs him to make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole in the desert.

If a serpent bit anyone,

he would look at the bronze serpent, and live—
remembering how he had sinned against God.

Medical folks today are familiar with this symbol, a *Caduceus*.

It has become the universal symbol for medical care.

Unfortunately, our modern version comes from an abuse of the original.

Such is the human way.

You see, after the Exodus,

God’s people began to worship the *staff* instead of the God who sent it.

By the time of the good king Hezekiah, God wanted it destroyed. (2 Kings 18)

By that time, other Ancient Near Eastern cultures superstitiously copied it:

The Assyrians,

the Babylonians,

the ancient Chinese,

Thousands of years later,

even the Greeks associated it with their god Hermes.

We human beings can twist every gift of *light* into *darkness*.

[To the Scriptures]

Enough historical interlude. Back to ‘Nick at Night.’

Jesus had come to bring *light* to Nicodemus.

To all the world, in fact.

The Scriptures already explained what He had come to do.

So in the *darkness* of night, Jesus shed *light* on the Scriptures.

Jesus took Nicodemus back to the Book of Numbers.

God's Word, written by Moses' own hand. Jesus said:

*“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,
so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
that whoever believes in him may have eternal life;
for God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son,
that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life!”*

God so loved the world – that phrasing is a holdover from old King James English. Nowadays, we might translate it: *God loved the world like so* or *in this way*.

In this way that Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,
That is how God loved the world.

Nicodemus knew the Scriptures and the history of Moses and that bronze serpent in the desert. Imagine the light he saw in that moment:

The Christ had come as the ‘bronze snake’ for *the world!*
For Jews and Greeks and Romans—all people!

But the Christ was far greater than the bronze snake because:

The snake was a reminder of the people's sin.

They looked upon it and saw their failure.

But when the Son of Man was lifted up, it was a reminder of His victory!

We look upon the Cross, as terrible as it is, and we see *light*—not *darkness*.

We even call that day *Good Friday!*

The day our sins were forgiven!

[Light in the Scriptures]

Nicodemus came to Jesus in the *darkness*.

You, brothers and sisters, are not in the *darkness*.

Christ has brought *light* to you— it's all there in the Scriptures.

Jesus shows us how to read the Scriptures, seeking after Him!

Even the Old Testament is all about Him!

Don't let this world fool you into thinking the Scriptures are:

some superstitious code to be deciphered,

or some magical book to predict the future.

Don't let the *darkness* entice you into despising the hearing of God's Word.

Instead, take to heart just *Who* the Scriptures are all about.

Let *Him* rescue you from the darkness.

Look to *Him* in the desert of this world, and be healed.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

**Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous deeds among the people. Amen! (Psalm 96:3)**
