

## John 3:1-21

This year we're celebrating a very important anniversary. Exactly 500 years ago on October 31<sup>st</sup> 1517, a German monk, Martin Luther, nailed a list of 95 grievances against the church of his day on the door of his local church in Wittenberg, Germany. That incident is generally taken by historians as marking the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in Western Europe.

One of the great calls of the Reformation was the phrase "*Justification by Faith Alone*." By which we mean that we are made right with God, accepted by Him, not by any good works we do, because we can never do enough, but we're made right with God purely by His grace alone, which we receive by faith, by simply believing in the Saviour He has sent, the Lord Jesus Christ.

This "*Justification by Faith Alone*", not only went against the church of Luther's day, but it goes against every other religion in the whole world. All religions, except Protestant Christianity, believe you have to do something to gain the favour of the god or gods of the religion. Buddhists walk round and round their temples endlessly reciting chants, because they think it'll give them a better life the next time around. Muslims have to go through a ritual prayer sequence five times a day, do charitable works, fast during Ramadan, go on the Hajj to Mecca if they can, and so on. And then maybe they'll be good enough for Allah to let them into heaven. Roman Catholics have to go to Mass and do as many good works of charity as they possibly can.

And the sad thing about all these religions, is that nobody can ever know for sure if they've done enough. They've just got to hope for the best. What a terrible burden that must be, never knowing if their god's pleased or not.

But Protestants believe we can get to heaven, and avoid any punishment for our sins, "*by Faith Alone*." In other words, simply by believing on Jesus Christ for our salvation. And that's true. That's the good news we have for the world:

Acts 16:31

*"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved."*

当信主耶稣，你和你一家都必得救。

It's a great comfort to the Christian to realise that our eternal destiny doesn't rely on what we do, because none of us are anywhere near good enough:

Isaiah 64:6

*"But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away."*

我们都像不洁净的人，所有的义都像污秽的衣服。我们都像叶子渐渐枯干。我们的罪孽好像风把我们吹去。

And it's also a great comfort to be able to know for sure that we're saved, and that we're never going to get the punishment we deserve.

John 10:28

*“And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.”*

我又赐给他们永生。他们永不灭亡，谁也不能从我手里把他们夺去。

The closer we get to God, the more sin we see in ourselves. It's promises such as these that are the greatest comfort to us every time we fall into sin.

But, there's one major objection people have to this. If, once we're saved, we're always saved, and we can't lose our salvation once we've got it, isn't that just licence to sin? If all we have to do to get to heaven is say we believe in Jesus, then we can do what we like, we'll still get there. We can go out on a sinning spree, God won't mind, He'll forgive us everything anyway. That can't be fair. Surely salvation must depend on what we do, not faith alone.

It's that objection I want to address today by looking at this passage:

*3:1 There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews:*

有一个法利赛人，名叫尼哥底母，是犹太人的官。

We know nothing else about Nicodemus except he was a ruler of the Jews. It was the rulers and religious leaders that Christ had the most trouble with. They were jealous of Him. The people realised He spoke as one with authority and not as the scribes. He knew what He was talking about. As opposed to the church leaders with their clever speeches trying to impress people. The religious leaders eventually handed Christ over to the Romans to be crucified. But here, Nicodemus, one of the leaders, comes on his own to meet Christ.

*2 The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.*

这人夜里来见耶稣，说，拉比，我们知道你是由神那里来作师傅的。因为你所行的神迹，若没有神同在，无人能行。

He probably went at night to avoid detection by the ruling council. He didn't want them to know he'd gone to see Jesus. That'd have been embarrassing.

But another reason could be that he couldn't sleep. All the time in his mind he was wondering whether this Jesus Christ of Nazareth was the prophesied Messiah or not. Maybe he'd heard bad things said about Him in the council,

and it was bugging him. He didn't want to go against God, he had to get to the truth. He had to find out. He couldn't sleep until he'd found out. So he went to Him in the middle of the night to sort it all out in his mind.

And he says: "*We know that thou art a teacher come from God.*" "**We know.**" There was more than one of them in the council who secretly recognised Christ was from God. Nicodemus seems to have been sent as a spokesman for them. We know of Joseph of Arimathaea, we meet him later in the Scriptures.

*"For no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him."* They'd been convinced of His having come from God by the miracles. And that's exactly what the miracles were meant to point to. Sadly, most of the people who saw the miracles just wanted the free healthcare. Christ told them:

John 6:26,27

*"Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled. Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you."*

耶稣回答说，我实实在在地告诉你们，你们找我，并不是因见了神迹，乃是因吃饼得饱。不要为那必坏的食物劳力，要为那存到永生的食物劳力，就是人子要赐给你们的。因为人子是父神所印证的。

And that's all Nicodemus managed to say. We don't know why he went to see Jesus, because he never got the chance to ask whatever he came for. Jesus intervened by saying something quite remarkable:

*3 Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*

耶稣回答说，我实实在在地告诉你，人若不重生，就不能见神的国。

Christ "answered" before Nicodemus asked a question. And He comes out with this statement, which Nicodemus didn't understand. And we might not understand it either, but it's the most fundamental teaching of the Christian faith. Christ tells Nicodemus that nobody can see the kingdom of God unless he is "*born again,*" or "*born from above.*"

Nicodemus had told Christ that they had recognised He was a teacher sent from God. And that's true, He was a teacher. He teaches us some wonderful lessons, let's hear Him. Let's love our enemies, let's do good to those who persecute us, let's turn the other cheek, let's go the extra mile. He's given us some wonderful teaching that nobody bothers with in the modern world today. So by all means let's spread His teachings abroad.

But, if all we see in Jesus Christ is a teacher, yes, it would be good to follow Him. But we'd soon find out that we couldn't keep it up for very long. No matter how hard we try to follow His teaching, we can't do it. Even to begin to follow Christ, we need a fundamental change in our very nature. And that's what Christ meant when He said "*Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*" Nicodemus wonders what "*born again*" means:

*4 Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?*

尼哥底母说，人已经老了，如何能重生呢？岂能再进母腹生出来吗？

The only sort of birth Nicodemus is familiar with is natural childbirth. It's obvious a grown man can't go through that again. So here is a religious leader on the ruling council, and he had absolutely no concept of heavenly things.

And that's what we've got in the church today. Christian churches have been in existence for many centuries in this country now. Most of them, I'm sure, were started by good Christian people. But, they've now become no more than glorified social clubs. As generations have come and gone, any sort of teaching on heavenly things, has been completely lost. The only sermons in so many churches nowadays are no more than moral or political messages. The church in Nicodemus' day after many centuries of tradition, had become no different.

*5 Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.*

耶稣说，我实实在在地告诉你，人若不是从水和圣灵生的，就不能进神的国。

*6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*

从肉身生的，就是肉身。从灵生的，就是灵。

*7 Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.*

我说，你们必须重生，你不要以为希奇。

Christ explained that to be "*born again*," doesn't mean going through physical childbirth again, but rather it means a spiritual birth. There's a completely different dimension to life that by nature we're all totally unaware of. We've all been born of water, born of the flesh. That's natural childbirth, which we've all been through. But if that's all we've experienced, there's a whole spiritual dimension that we just can't see, we really can't. To see the kingdom of God, to begin to live a Christ-like life, we also need to be born of the Spirit. That's the

new birth, a spiritual birth. And we must all go through this spiritual birth, in order to have any hope of getting out of this sinful life we've been born into.

2 Corinthians 5:17

*“Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”*

若有人在基督里，他就是新造的人。旧事已过，都变成新的了。

*8 The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.*

风随着意思吹，你听见风的响声，却不晓得从哪里来，往哪里去。凡从圣灵生的，也是如此。

Then Christ compares everyone “*born of the Spirit*” to the wind. Now that might seem odd at first. The wind “*bloweth where it listeth.*” We think of the wind as moving about at random, and the weather coming about by random movements in the air. But that's not the case at all. The weather, in its minutest detail, is controlled by God in His overarching providence.

Dunkirk 1940. Thousands of soldiers had to be quickly evacuated from continental Europe as the Nazis were advancing. Just for that one day, the English Channel was calm as a millpond to allow many to be saved alive.

In 1984 York Minster was struck by lightning causing a lot of damage. Why did God do that? Three days beforehand an openly unbelieving bishop had just been consecrated there. God will not be mocked. It was said of Christ:

Mark 4:41

*“What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”*

这到底是谁，连风和海也听从他了。

I heard a preacher once say that it was Satan that caused earthquakes and hurricanes and what we call “natural disasters,” but that's not true. Satan's not that powerful. He's powerful, we don't mess with him, but he's a spiritual enemy, he's the accuser of the brethren. He can't change the weather.

We hear the sound of the wind but we can't tell where it comes from nor where it's going. And that's compared to everyone born of the Spirit. We can't see the wind, but we can see its effect. And it's the same with spiritual things. The world can't understand the born-again Christian. Everybody born of the Spirit no longer behaves the way the world behaves. They no longer live for themselves, but for Him who gave Himself for them:

Galatians 2:20

*“I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.”*

我已经与基督同钉十字架。现在活着的，不再是我，乃是基督在我里面活着。并且我如今在肉身活着，是因信神的儿子而活，他是爱我，为我舍己。

The world can't understand the new birth, because it has no experience of it. They can't explain our new life, our new desires, our new behaviour, no longer living for ourselves but for Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 2:14

*“But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”*

然而属血气的人不领会神圣灵的事，反倒以为愚拙。并且不能知道，因为这些事惟有属灵的人才能看透。

*9 Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be?*

尼哥底母问他说，怎能有这事呢？

*10 Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?*

耶稣回答说，你是以色列人的先生，还不明白这事吗？

Nicodemus was outwardly very high up in the religious hierarchy. He was a master in Israel. But he knew absolutely nothing of spiritual things at all. And Christ rebukes him for that. And Christ goes on:

*11 Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness.*

我实实在在地告诉你，我们所说的，是我们知道的，我们所见证的，是我们见过的。你们却不领受我们的见证。

*12 If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?*

我对你们说地上的事，你们尚且不信，若说天上的事，如何能信呢？

Christ is the true witness from the Father, who came into this world to teach us about heavenly things. But men don't receive the witness of God. Nobody listens to Jesus Christ today. Just on an earthly level, nobody bothers with His teachings. So how can anybody be expected to know about spiritual, heavenly things? He came to this world and was rejected. Men prefer their own way.

John 1:10-13

*"He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."*

他在世界，世界也是借着他造的，世界却不认识他。他到自己的地方来，自己的人倒不接待他。凡接待他的，就是信他名的人，他就赐他们权柄，作神的儿女。这等人不是从血气生的，不是从情欲生的，也不是从人意生的，乃是从神生的。

So, how do we receive this new birth? How can we become "born again" so that we can see the kingdom of God? So that we can see spiritual things?

*13 And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.*

除了从天降下仍旧在天的人子，没有人升过天。

We must come to Jesus Christ. He is the only way. He is the only one who is of the Father, come down from heaven. Who is "God manifest in the flesh."

Acts 4:12

*"Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved."*

除他以外，别无拯救。因为在天下人间，没有赐下别的名，我们可以靠着得救。

John 14:6

*"I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."*

我就是道路，真理，生命。若不借着。没有人能到父那里去。

We must believe in Jesus Christ, put our trust in Him to save us from our sins:

*14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: 15 That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.*



摩西在旷野怎样举蛇，人子也必照样被举起来。叫一切信他的都得永生。（或作叫一切信的人在他里面得永生）

This refers to a judgment God brought on the people of Israel in Numbers 21:

Numbers 21:6-9

*“And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee; pray unto the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived.”*

于是耶和华使火蛇进入百姓中间，蛇就咬他们。以色列人中死了许多。百姓到摩西那里，说，我们怨？？耶和华和你，有罪了。求你祷告耶和华，叫这些蛇离开我们。于是摩西为百姓祷告。耶和华对摩西说，你制造一条火蛇，挂在杆子上。凡被咬的，一望这蛇，就必得活。摩西便制造一条铜蛇，挂在杆子上。凡被蛇咬的，一望这铜蛇就活了。

God brought a judgment on Israel for their sin. But He also provided a way out. Anyone who had been bitten, who then simply looked at the brass serpent, lived. That’s all you had to do, just look. Now I’m sure many people would have thought that to be ridiculous. How is it possible that just looking at a piece of brass can save anyone from snake poison? So I’m sure many of them wouldn’t even have bothered to look, because they thought it stupid.

And that’s exactly what we’ve got in the world today. We’ve all been bitten by the serpent. We’ve all been born in a fallen state, with a sinful nature. But God has provided a way out. All we have to do is look to Jesus Christ, believe in Him, trust in Him, and we can be saved from our sins, from our sinful, selfish natures. But so many people around us think that’s ridiculous. So they don’t.

*16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*

神爱世人，甚至将他的独生子赐给他们，叫一切信他的，不至灭亡，反得永生。

God loved the world “so,” in this manner: Not that God’s going to forgive everybody everything unconditionally anyway, no matter how bad they are. No, no, no. That’s not the manner in which God loved the world. He loved the world in this manner: that whosoever simply believeth in Christ should not get the due punishment for their sins, but have everlasting life.



Now, we must forsake our sin, to repent of our past lives, our sinful natures. We've got to be finished with that life. But then all we need to do is believe in Him, put our trust in Him. That's it. That's all we can do. And, if we are genuine, if we truly hate our old life and want to change, and want to receive the new life Jesus Christ can give, then pray to Him, believe in Him, start to trust in Him to lead and to take care of us. That's it.

And if we're genuinely genuine, He will respond. He will put a new heart within us and change our very nature. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. We must recognise ourselves as sinners and come to Him:

*17 For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.*

因为神差他的儿子降世，不是要定世人的罪，（或作审判世人下同）乃是要叫世人因他得救。

Jesus Christ came the first time as a Saviour. All those who put their trust in Him will surely be saved. But He's going to come again at the end of time as a judge. While we are here, now, there's still hope for every one of us. He's come to save. And all we have to do is trust in Him to save us to eternal life:

*18 He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.*

信他的人，不被定罪。不信的人，罪已经定了，因为他不信神独生子的名。

But if we just sit back and do nothing, we'll reap what we sow. We'll be judged according to the natural human nature we received at birth. Do we really want to continue living for self, selfish desires, selfish ambitions? Aren't we fed up with that yet? By nature every one of us loves darkness. We don't want Christ. That's why, when Christ came into the world, he was put to death. Not that He did anything wrong, He was sinless. But men couldn't abide His light:

*19 And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.*

光来到世间，世人因自己的行为是恶的，不爱光倒爱黑暗，定他们的罪就是在此。

*20 For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.*

凡作恶的便恨光，并不来就光，恐怕他的行为受责备。

*21 But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.*

但行真理的必来就光，要显明他所行的是靠神而行。

So, do we hate the light of Jesus Christ, because we don't want to give up our sin? Or do we love the truth, in which case we'll be drawn to the light. That's the choice everybody has to deal with.

Nicodemus is mentioned in two other places in Scripture, and it's obvious that sometime after this conversation with Christ, such a change had happened to him. In John 7, we find him standing up against the rulers in the council:

John 7:48-52

*“Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on him? But this people who knoweth not the law are cursed. Nicodemus saith unto them, (he that came to Jesus by night, being one of them,) Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth? They answered and said unto him, Art thou also of Galilee? Search, and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet.”*

官长或是法利赛人，岂有信他的呢？但这些不明白律法的百姓，是被咒诅的。内中有尼哥底母，就是从前去见耶稣的，对他们说，不先听本人的口供，不知道他所作的事，难道我们的律法还定他的罪吗？他们回答说，你也是出于加利利吗？你且去查考，就可知道，加利利没有出过先知。

And then later on in John 19, we hear of him with Joseph of Arimathaea taking away the body of Christ to give Him a decent burial:

John 19:38-40

*“And after this Joseph of Arimathaea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus. And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight. Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury.”*

这些事以后，有亚利马太人约瑟，是耶稣的门徒，只因怕犹太人，就暗暗地作门徒，他来求彼拉多，要把耶稣的身体领去。彼拉多允准，他就把耶稣的身体领去了。又有尼哥底母，就是先前夜里去见耶稣的，带着没药，和沉香，约有一百斤前来。他们就照犹太人殡葬的规矩，把耶稣的身体，用细麻布加上香料裹好了。

Nicodemus had received the new birth. It was obvious that he'd experienced a true change in his heart. When we first meet him, he knows nothing of spiritual things whatsoever. To him, Christ was just a teacher from God, not his Lord and Saviour. But now, see how he loves Him, as he boldly stands up to the council, and as he takes the Lord's body for burial. Without the new birth, he wouldn't have done either of those things. He'd probably just have kept quiet to save his skin. But his boldness is the fruit of the new birth.

So, back to "*Justification by Faith Alone*." If we've never experienced the new birth, if we've never been born-again in our hearts and received a new nature from Christ, then it's quite understandable we'd think that salvation obtained simply by believing, without any connection to our good works, is too easy. That would provoke two kinds of response: Firstly, the critics of it would say it gives licence to sin. That can't possibly be right. So they reject it altogether.

But there'll also be a lot of other people who'll think it's a great idea. Because they want to carry on freely in their sin, and still have that heavenly insurance policy at the same time. And it has to be said, Protestant churches today are full of that kind of people, and it's a terrible witness to the truth. Christ said:

Matthew 7:22,23

*"Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity."*

当那日必有许多人对我说，主阿，主阿，我们不是奉你的名传道，奉你的名赶鬼，奉你的名行许多异能吗？我就明明地告诉他们说，我从来不认识你们，你们这些作恶的人，离开我去吧。

On the other hand, the truly born-again Christian has had a fundamental change of nature. He now hates sin. He just wouldn't want to sin. He would rather want to run away from sin whenever he can. The very last thing on his mind is to think that now he's saved he can sin all he wants. No. God has written the law in his heart, to take away his desire to sin:

Psalms 119:11

*"Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee."*

我将你的话藏在心里，免得我得罪你。

Christians still sin, but whenever we do, we don't do it deliberately, we don't want to do it, we fall into it. And every time it happens, we hate it. Let's never take the forgiveness of sins lightly. It took Christ to the cross to forgive sin. Forgiveness with God should never be thought of as easy and cheap.

Psalms 130:4

*"But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared."*

但在你有赦免之恩，要叫人敬畏你。

To the world, just like Nicodemus at first, Christ is no more than a teacher, one of many, just like Mohammed and Buddha and all the rest. No. He's far more than just a teacher. He is Lord and Saviour to all who believe.

Let's make sure that every one of us puts our trust in Christ, and receives the new birth that He freely gives to all who call upon Him. Then we'll be saved from our sins, we'll know we've been saved, we'll know we can never be lost, and we'll certainly never ever want to try to find an excuse for sin any more.