

*Three friends were discussing death and one guy asked the other two: **What would you like people to say about you at your funeral?***

The first guy said, “At my funeral I would like people to say, ‘He was a great humanitarian, a man who cared about his community – an example to follow.’”

The next guy thought about it and said, “I want people to say, ‘He was a loving husband and an awesome father, and a great friend to everyone.’”

The last guy said, “Well, at my funeral, I want people to say ‘Hey look everybody, he’s moving!’”

It’s Easter, and this morning we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus – a real event that occurred at a real time in history where the crucified and lifeless and buried body of Jesus came back to life again.

I can’t stress how important the resurrection of Jesus is for us as Christians because what we do and what we believe hinges on this one single event. Without it, without the resurrection, Jesus is not who He claimed to be, His words cannot be trusted, and He cannot save, because quite frankly – a dead Savior cannot save anybody. If the resurrection of Jesus did not occur, the gospel is false, we are just wasting our time playing church, and we have no hope of eternal life whatsoever.

I think everyone here knows the Easter story. Some 2000 years ago, on a Friday – we call it Good Friday, Jesus was crucified, He died, and He was buried in a tomb. Then on that Easter Sunday morning, after the Sabbath, the sun came up, and some of Jesus followers went to the tomb to mourn and to give some extra care to His body for burial.

These followers of Jesus assumed they would find His body in the tomb – for like everyone else, they thought it was over – it was the end of the story. They saw Jesus crucified, they saw Him die, they saw Him buried, and they believed He would stay dead. That’s what they expected – that’s why they are going to the tomb to take care of His dead body, but when they got to the tomb – the stone that guarded the tomb had been rolled away, the tomb was empty, and His body was nowhere to be found. No one knew what had happened to Jesus – no one could find His body, but low and behold, His body found them. Jesus was alive.

We are told that Jesus appeared to His closest followers and then in the book of **Acts**, we are told that over 500 people saw a living, resurrected Jesus, and His appearance lit a fire in His disciples who had been in hiding, His appearance

sparked life into the movement He started, His appearance confirmed who Jesus was and validated what He said all along, and His appearance gave hope to a lost and dying world.

That's the Easter story that we have come to know, but you may not know the story behind the Easter story. There is a back story, and it's that story that I want to explore this morning because this back story sets the stage for the Easter story.

The back story involves two guys, one named Nicodemus and the other was Joseph of Arimathea, and before I tell you what they did, I need to first tell you who they were. So, let's start with Nicodemus, and we are introduced to him in the Gospel of **John, Chapter 3**, so turn there in your Bible.

Nicodemus was a highly educated man who appeared to be genuinely interested in the things of God. We are told he was a Pharisee, and when we think of Pharisees, we tend to see them as these self-righteous, legalistic hypocrites, who were part of a corrupt religious establishment that had a strangle hold on the people. They believed that if you want be right with God, if you want to impress God, if you want to go to heaven – you have to follow the strict letter of the Law and the rules they just made up along the way. So, they were going through their religious motions – crossing their “T's” and dotting their “I's” but their hearts were far from God. That's how we tend to see the Pharisees – in a negative light, but there were those men in this group who wanted to do what was right, who were devoted to serving God, and Nicodemus appears to be one of these men.

Now, we also told in the Bible that Nicodemus was a member of a very elite group called the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was 70-member council of elders from the Pharisees and the Sadducees led by the high priest, and they were the wealthiest, the most powerful, and the most influential men in the region – they were like a combination of our Congress and our Supreme Court all rolled into one, and because of their lofty status, people assumed they must be God's guys.

So, Nicodemus, this man who represents the very best that religion can produce, comes alone to Jesus at night. We are not told why he comes to Jesus – maybe he was selected by the other Pharisees to question Jesus in private, maybe he represented another group of people, or maybe he came on his own – for personal reasons, in the cover of darkness so no one would recognize him. Whatever the case, he now gets some alone time with Jesus.

Nicodemus greets Jesus by calling Him “**Rabbi.**” That was a respectful title of honor, but also a very common title for a Jewish religious teacher suggesting that

Nicodemus wants to talk to Jesus like one Rabbi talking to another – so it's obvious that Nicodemus has no earthly idea who he is really talking to. He has no clue that Jesus is their long-awaited Messiah, the Savior, the Lamb that God has sent to take away the sin of the world. Nicodemus does not know who Jesus is, but Nicodemus admits that Jesus is doing things like performing miracles which made it clearly obvious that God is with Him. No one was doing or had ever done the things that Jesus was doing – so Jesus had their undivided attention, people were fixated on Him, and there were questions that needed answers which prompted this private meeting.

It seems that Nicodemus wanted to know if Jesus was the One ushering in the kingdom of God for that was the interest of all devout Jews at that time, but before Nicodemus could ask his question, Jesus knew his thoughts and gave him the answer. Look at **John 3:3**. Jesus says,

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Let's focus on the key phrase **born again**. In the original language it has a double meaning. The word can mean “born again” or “born above.” In this case, both meanings seem to apply. Jesus is telling Nicodemus if you are seeking the kingdom of God, you will never see it without being born again from above.

Now, keep in mind who Jesus is talking to. It's Nicodemus, a man who represented the very best of human effort, he's the best that religion has to offer, but here Jesus essentially tells him, *“You don't need more religion. The only way to be right with God, to experience the kingdom you seek, to have eternal life, is to be born again from above.”*

Well Nicodemus, this religious leader, apparently has no idea what Jesus is talking about, and replies: **“How can an old man go back into his mother's womb?”** That's a really terrible thought and a ridiculous thought, so Jesus explains further in **verse 5-6** where He says,

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

There are many views about this statement by Jesus, and it's easy to miss the forest because of the trees, but we can't miss the intent here – that Jesus is trying to get Nicodemus to understand the truth, so my guess is Jesus is using Old Testament

references that Nicodemus would be familiar with. For example, we are told in **Ezekiel 36:25-26**,

²⁵“Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. ²⁶“Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”

In this passage Ezekiel predicted a time when God would cleanse His people from their sins, using the illustration of water, and give them a new heart and a new spirit – a promise to be later fulfilled by the finished work of Jesus.

So, in light of Old Testament passages like this, Jesus is helping Nicodemus to connect the dots so to speak, explaining that to be born again doesn't come from being religious, because religion is based on human work and effort that stem from the flesh, and flesh can only give birth to flesh. Human effort and works cannot give spiritual birth. In other words, to be connected to God, to be cleansed from sin, to have a new spiritual life, you need a spiritual birth – you need to be born again.

Well, Nicodemus is amazed by this, and he asks Jesus **“How can these things be?”** because he's thinking, wait a minute, **how could I have missed this?** My whole life I've tried to please God with human effort, I've tried to do everything right, I've tried to be perfect, I've tried to be obedient, I've tried to earn my way into heaven, **and now you're telling me that will never be enough?** Well, the conversation continues, and then Jesus says this in **verse 13**:

“No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man.”

Nicodemus had previously admitted that God was with Jesus – now in so many words, Jesus is claiming that He is much more than just a Rabbi – He comes from God – He has come from heaven, and Jesus knows more about heaven than anyone. He knows heaven firsthand, and Jesus knows better than anyone how to get there – and then Jesus says something that Nicodemus is likely very familiar with. Again, Jesus is connecting the dots for him. Look at **verses 14-15**,

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.”

Nicodemus surely knew this story – it’s an Old Testament story that comes from **Numbers 21**, where the people of Israel had sinned against God, so God sent venomous snakes among the people – killing many of them. Well, Moses cries out to God for forgiveness on behalf of the people, and God tells Moses to make a snake out of bronze as a symbol of healing, lift it high on a pole, and if people were snake bitten, they could look at the bronze snake and they would not die.

Jesus told this story to Nicodemus because Jesus, who was God made flesh, knew there would come a time when He too would be **lifted up** as the cure for sin, and everyone who looked to Jesus and believed in Him would experience spiritual healing and **have eternal life**.

Well, the story continues. Jesus goes on with His ministry, and the Pharisees keep doing their thing, and they do not like Jesus. Except for a few of them, they hate His guts because Jesus is becoming really popular, thousands of people are following Him, and the religious establishment is afraid of losing their power and their influence over the people.

Finally, they have had enough – this Jesus movement has gotten way out of hand, and they want to get rid of Him. So, they convene a meeting to discuss the Jesus situation. They really want to take Jesus out, but during this meeting – Nicodemus speaks up and asks a really good question mentioned in **John 7:51**. He asks,

“Our law does not judge a man unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing, does it?”

*“Hey guys, I’m not a follower of Jesus, but before we have this guy arrested, maybe we should ask Him some questions first. **How does that sound?**”*

Well, apparently it didn’t sound good to them at all, and the others turned on Nicodemus for asking the good question – accusing him of being fooled and following Jesus. So, they adjourn the meeting and go home, leaving mad at poor Nicodemus.

Now, there was another man who was also a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin as well, who was likely at this same meeting with Nicodemus. His name was Joseph, and he had been born in Arimathea. Joseph was also a highly visible, distinguished member of the religious elite – and he was also a secret follower of Jesus. That’s what we are told in the gospels, but no one knows that yet. It’s a secret.

Well, as we all know, Jesus was eventually arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. The Sanhedrin held sham trials against Jesus, and He was eventually taken by the Sanhedrin to Pontus Pilate – for he had the authority to render a death sentence. Pilate found no guilt in Jesus and tried to release Him several times, but due to the intense pressure from the crowd who were worked into a frenzy by the religious leaders – Pilate caved in. Jesus, who did nothing wrong, was sentenced to death by crucifixion. After being horribly beaten to a bloody pulp, Jesus was led outside the city of Jerusalem where He was to be crucified in front of onlookers, witnesses, to include the Sanhedrin and other members of the religious establishment.

Nicodemus and Joseph are likely there as well, but they were not in agreement with their counterparts to see Jesus crucified. So, they saw and heard the nails being pounded into the hands and feet of Jesus, and then they saw Jesus being slowly raised and lifted up until the cross was vertical in the ground. I wonder if Nicodemus remembered what Jesus told him that night – that just like the snake being lifted up on a pole to heal those who were snake bitten, so the Son of Man must be lifted up to heal mankind from their sin. So, they watched Jesus die on the cross and they also saw a Roman soldier pierce the side of Jesus with a spear to confirm He was, in fact, dead.

Now this is important. When a man was crucified, the Romans left him there on the cross to die, usually to rot as a symbol of their muscle and power, and once they made their point, the body would be removed from the cross, put in a wagon, and taken to the town dump south of Jerusalem. As far as the Romans were concerned, those crucified were criminals, the worst of the worst, and they got what they deserved – the dump. The dump was a mass grave in a valley called the Valley of Gehenna, and oddly enough, that word *Gehenna* is often translated as hell. It had the history of being the place where child sacrifice had occurred when the people were involved in pagan worship, but it had since been turned into a town dump where garbage and the bodies of dead animals and criminals, and all kinds of filth were burned, and this is where the body of Jesus was to be taken – to the Valley of Gehenna, the town dump.

But, enter Nicodemus and Joseph. They were there. They saw the crucifixion. They saw Jesus die and they had to do something. So, they do the unthinkable. Let's go to **John 19:38-42**.

³⁸ After these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. So he came and took away His

body. ³⁹ Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight. ⁴⁰ So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. ⁴¹ Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. ⁴² Therefore because of the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

A chicken and a pig saw a church sign announcing the sermon: “What Can We Do to Help the Poor?” The chicken suggested that they feed them bacon and eggs. The pig thought about it and replied, “There’s one thing wrong with your idea: for you it requires only a contribution, but for me it requires total commitment!”

Both Nicodemus and Joseph were committed although they surely suspected they would incur the wrath and the rejection of their counterparts and be viewed as traitors – but they acted anyway not knowing the personal cost.

While Nicodemus likely stayed near the cross to ensure nothing happened to the body of Jesus, Joseph goes to Pilate and seeks permission to take the body so Jesus can at least have an honorable burial instead of His body being cast into the town dump. Pilate gives Joseph permission to take the body.

Well, the Sabbath was approaching, so Nicodemus and Joseph quickly take the lifeless body of Jesus, they washed it, and then they tightly wrapped His body from head to toe with about 100 pounds of herbs, and spices, and oils used for embalming which were folded in sheets of cloth wrapping.

Then the body of Jesus was put in a new carved tomb which belonged to Joseph, and once the body was placed inside the tomb, they rolled a stone against the entrance and they went away never expecting to see Jesus again. After that, the Pharisees learned of what happened, so they go to Pilate to have the tomb sealed so no one would take the body of Jesus and claim He had risen. So, permission was granted and guards were posted at the tomb just to make sure it was completely secure. But on the third day, on Easter Sunday morning, the stone was rolled away, and Jesus unexpectedly walked out leaving an empty tomb. He was alive.

Now let me tell you why the back story with Nicodemus and Joseph were so important to the Easter story.

What would have happened if Jesus had not been prepared for burial by these two guys? What if Jesus wasn’t buried in a tomb, and instead, like so many others who

had been crucified, He had been thrown into the town dump? What would have been said when Jesus was later seen alive by all these people?

Well, in order to discount the resurrection of Jesus, people would have claimed that Jesus had not really died, He only appeared to be dead, and simply recovered from His wounds three days later. That's what would have been said, but because Nicodemus and Joseph – two men from the Sanhedrin of all people, having no idea of what hung in the balance, never knowing what was truly at stake – because they did what they did, some 2000 years later, we can celebrate Easter knowing, in fact, that Jesus was crucified, He died, He was prepared for burial, He was placed in a secured tomb, and He rose again. We can have confidence that Jesus was who He said He was and we can take Him at His word which leads me right back to that conversation with Nicodemus in **John 3**. We had ended with **verse 15**, so let's go to the next verse, a verse you know very well – **verse 16**. Jesus said,

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

This might be the most important verse in all the Bible, and remember the context. Jesus is talking to Nicodemus – the very best that religion had to offer, and Jesus said to him, *“For this is the way God loved the world – He gave His one and only Son so that everyone who believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”*

Being good is not good enough. All your good works and all your religious effort will not get you into God's kingdom. It's not about behavior, it's about believing in Jesus – it's about relying and trusting Him with the intent of committing all that you are, all that you have, and all that you hope to become on Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. **Why?** For God so loved you, that He gave His only Son for you, so that if you believe in Him, you will not perish but have eternal life.

John Griffith was in his early twenties. He was newly married and full of optimism. Along with his lovely wife, he had been blessed with a beautiful baby. He was living the American dream, but then, the Great Depression occurred – shattering the economy and John's dreams.

Brokenhearted, John packed up his few possessions, and with his wife and his little son, they headed East. They made their way to the edge of the Mississippi River and John found a job tending one of the great railroad bridges there, and day after day, John would sit in the control room and direct the enormous gears of the immense bridge over the mighty river.

It wasn't until 1937 that a new dream began to be birthed in John's heart. His young son was now eight years old and John had begun to catch a vision for a new life, a life in which Greg, his little son, would work shoulder to shoulder with him. The first day of this new life dawned and brought with it a new hope and a fresh purpose. Excitedly, they packed their lunches and headed off towards the immense bridge.

Greg looked on as his dad moved the huge lever that raised and lowered the vast bridge so barges and ships could pass below, it was exciting, and before they knew it, it was lunch time. John had just elevated the bridge and allowed some scheduled ships to pass through, and then taking his son by the hand, they headed off towards lunch. As they were eating, John heard the whistle of a distant train. Looking at his watch in disbelief, John saw that it was already 1:07. Immediately, he remembered that the bridge was still raised and that the Memphis Express with 400 passengers on board would be by in just minutes.

John told his son to "stay put" and he quickly leaped to his feet, jumped onto the catwalk, and ran at full-tilt to the ladder leading into the control room. Once in, he searched the river to make sure that no ships were in sight. And then, as he had been trained to do, he looked straight down beneath the bridge to make certain nothing was below. As his eyes moved downward, he saw something so horrifying that his heart froze in his chest. For there, below him in the massive gearbox that housed the colossal gears that moved the bridge was his son.

Apparently, Greg had tried to follow his dad but had fallen off the catwalk. Even now he was wedged between the teeth of two main cogs in the gear box. Although he appeared to be conscious, John could see that his son's leg had already begun to bleed. Then an even more horrifying thought flashed through his mind – lowering the bridge for the train would mean killing his own son.

Panicked, his mind wandered in every direction, frantically searching for solutions, but as soon as these thoughts appeared, he realized there just wouldn't be enough time. His mind darted here and there, searching for yet another solution to save His son, but he also considered the 400 people that were moving closer and closer to the bridge. Soon the train would come roaring out of the trees with tremendous speed, but this was his son...his only son...his pride...his joy.

He knew in a moment there was only one thing he could do. He knew he would have to do it. And so, burying his face under his left arm, he plunged down the

lever. The cries of his son were quickly drowned out by the relentless sound of the bridge as it moved slowly into position. With only seconds to spare, the Memphis Express – with its 400 passengers – roared out of the trees and across the mighty bridge.

John Griffith lifted his tear-stained face and looked into the windows of the passing train. People were just going about their normal carefree leisurely activities – not a person looked his way. No one even cast a glance at the giant gear box that housed the remains of his hopes and his dreams. In anguish he pounded the glass in the control room. He cried out “What’s the matter with you people? Don’t you know? Don’t you care? Don’t you know I’ve sacrificed my son for you? What’s wrong with you?”

Of course, no one heard. No one even looked, and then, as suddenly as it had happened, it was over. The train disappeared moving rapidly across the bridge and out over the horizon.

God in His great love willingly sacrificed His Son Jesus to pay your sin debt so that you might have eternal life with Him, and you know this is true because the story did not end at the cross. Jesus wasn’t just another guy who was crucified and died – instead three days later, Jesus rose from the grave and appeared to many people, proving who He was – God made flesh, the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Savior of the world. His resurrection validated everything Jesus said, so we can take Him at His word. His resurrection gave absolute credibility to the promises Jesus made – to include the promise in **John 3:16**, and His resurrection provided hope to those who would look to Jesus and trust Him with their lives.

That’s the Easter story and the story behind the Easter story.

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