

John's Gospel: Jesus the Light of the World.

Nelson Cathedral

March 1, 2026.

OT Genesis 12:1-4

NT Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

Gospel John 3:1-17

Introduction

As a teenager, one of my most memorable car trips with my parents was a drive back from Auckland to Christchurch. We had a Holden that my parents had bought from a car dealer around 12 months beforehand. As we left Auckland and drove up the Bombay hills, the car came to a resounding and smoky stop.

The rest of the day was spent, with a significant amount of time on the side of the road; with Dad going to the local garage, getting the car towed, and

finding a replacement before we restarted our long journey.

Now my father was a metallurgist at DSIR and had worked on many cases of metal fatigue and failure causing fatalities. As it turned out, our car's engine block had a crack in it which had been welded back together, but the weld had failed. The engine was unrepairable, and if we had been told about the repair, my Dad would have never bought the car.

Now the moral of the story is that when some parts of are broken, you cannot fix them. Instead, you have to replace the whole thing.

Over the coming weeks we are going to be looking at John's Gospel, to see the picture he paints of Jesus and his mission, and what that means for us to follow Jesus.

A bit like my engine story, God's plan which began in creation and continued in Genesis 12, with the

building of a people through whom God would bless the world, had stalled. This was because the human heart was broken beyond repair. God's work in the world in the coming of Jesus was not about fixing the part, but about rebuilding the whole – a reborn humanity.

So, we are going to start by listening to the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, to see what this tells us about Jesus.

John's Gospel

Before we come to Nicodemus, we do need to set the scene of the Gospel as a whole. Have you ever cheated and skipped to the last chapter of a book before you have read it.

Well spoiler alert, in John chapter 20 verse 31 we read, *“But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God,*

and that through believing you may have life in his name”.

John the Son of Zebedee, the beloved disciple, was one of Jesus' inner circle. He was an eyewitness to all Jesus did and said, and to the resurrection. John wrote this while in Ephesus (modern-day Turkey) around 80-90AD. He was writing to a second generation community of Jewish and Gentile Christians, to tell them about the signs that showed who Jesus is and the salvation that only he offers. He was doing so that they might come to believe, which also means continue to believe in Jesus, and have life in his name as God's new people.

And what distinguishes John's Gospel from the other three Gospels is his “top-down” approach, where we hear from the beginning of Jesus coming from Glory: In chapter 1 verse 14, John writes, *“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of*

grace and truth.” Jesus who came from glory is the light of the world, and entered our world of darkness. It is he who will return to glory on the cross.

Nicodemus

So, Nicodemus, a member of the ruling council, a Pharisee, and a rabbi of some fame, comes to meet with Jesus. We can only imagine that they have a lengthy conversation which John summarise here.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night which highlights the reoccurring theme of darkness.

- He could have been afraid for his reputation.
- But also, despite his reputation and righteousness, Nicodemus was still living in darkness in relation to the truth. As John goes on to say in 3:19, *“the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil”*.

- For Nicodemus and Judaism at the time, being right with God was about keeping the Law, but as John was showing, and as Paul wrote in Romans 4, being made right with God – what we call righteousness – is about faith, and in particular faith in Jesus as God’s own Son. And this truth is for all people because that was God’s plan all along.

So, Nicodemus begins with an enquiry, to engage Jesus in discussion. And you can almost hear the question behind the words, “So who are you really”.

But instead of a theological discussion, Jesus shifts gear, *“No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above”*.

From his response in verse 4, Nicodemus clearly misunderstands. In Judaism, God’s kingdom was a future hope into which all Jews who faithfully kept the law would be freely admitted. So, he asks, how can you be physically reborn?

But Jesus now says there is another pre-requisite, a spiritual rebirth leading to the renewal of the whole person. This is a revelation from above, that enables us to know the truth and believe and be reborn.

Jesus is saying a new era has begun where the Spirit of God is at work. This began with the water baptism of John the Baptist, but is now fulfilled through Jesus, the one who came from heaven and baptises with the Spirit.

In verse 9, we come to Nicodemus' response, "how can this be", which can be taken in two ways:

- the first is an honest inquiry, "how can this be....can we really start over";
- or it could be taken more cynically, "yeah right".

But in his reply Jesus is challenging the worldview of Nicodemus that relied on commitment to Torah, obedience, prayer, sacrifice, and racial privilege.

What do we rely on to feel right with God other than our relationship with Jesus?

But the real problem was the refusal to believe in Jesus as God's promised Messiah, not a lack of knowledge about Jesus, after all Scripture including John has recorded the signs of God's kingdom that Jesus did. Just as today, people believe all sorts of spiritual things, but when it comes to Jesus, they refuse to see the truth.

And it is here that John makes a unique claim about Jesus. Only Jesus can show us the true spiritual reality, because only Jesus has come from heaven. Yes, Jesus fully human, and Jesus the incarnate Son of Man, who will return to his place of glory on the cross.

In using the phrase "Son of Man" John captures a description Jesus used of himself, that reflects similar images found in Daniel 7 of the messiah figure. But

in John, this name points to Jesus' divine origin and his humanity.

No human spiritual leader has that sort of access to God - only Jesus, who is God with us, fully divine and fully human. This distinguishes Jesus from any other spiritual figure, which is challenging in our world where all spiritual figures are treated as the same in terms of authority and value. But here John is clear, the exclusive claim is that it is only belief in Jesus that leads to God's kingdom and eternal life.

God so Loved.

Finally, we come to the most well-known verse in the New Testament, John 3:16. In a sense, this is John's summary of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus and two words stand out.

1. First is the word "love". It was for this reason that Jesus came into the world – to show us

God's love, God's heart to save us through faith in Jesus. This love is beyond our natural limits of race and nation – it is a gift for all.

2. Second the word "world". It is true that God will save all of creation, but here John's use of "world" does not refer to the planet, but to the realm of humanity, who now live in darkness when it comes to God.

I could not help think of the Orcs and Goblins in Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*, creatures who can only live in the dark and are afraid of the light. But Jesus came to bring the light of God's love to all people. He came down from heaven to earth, to save us!

And our response is to believe, so that we too are counted as God's children, children of the light. What was broken, remember the engine, has been replaced with a renewed humanity.

Conclusion.

As I conclude, you may recall the rescue of Graham Garnett, who failed to return from a solo tramp in the Kahurangi national park in January. He was found alive in a hut after three weeks.

This was a remarkable story of survival, and bush safety tells you - if you get lost stay put and let search and rescue find you.

What we see in John's Gospel is not our search for God, but God's search and plan for us. Our spiritual transformation is not horizontal, it is not about evoking some higher or better behaviour, or the unlocking of some inner capacity.

John tells us this transformation is vertical, God finds us. God has come down to us in the person of his Son Jesus, to save us. And through his Spirit, God renews and transforms us into the people of God.

As we listen into this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, John shines a light on our most important understanding. What Jesus does and says is important, but what is most important is where Jesus came from. He came from God himself because he is God. That is a radical difference from all other religious teachers and religious practices.

It is through Jesus that we see God at work, and John is writing so we too may continue to believe.

Amen.