

The text we are about to read contains two verses that will be familiar to many of us. We will read two verses that have been used as the primary verses for a lot of Christians.

You may not realize that these two verses are so close together in the gospel of John and you may not know the context around these two verses. Hopefully, today, we will have some clarity concerning the context of these two verses and how they speak to us today.

This text will begin by introducing us to Nicodemus who is a Pharisee. Pharisees were one of the main Jewish religious sects of the day but only 2 of these sects are mentioned in the Bible.

The Jewish sects mentioned in the Bible are the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Essenes were not mentioned in the Bible, but their existence was discovered when the Dead Sea Scrolls were found nearly 70 years ago.

The Pharisees were very observant of the Jewish purity laws. They are heavily criticized in the Bible, however, for being overly rigid on law keeping.

The passage we are reading today is told by the gospel writer John. The gospel writer John uses lots of imagery to tell his stories. The images that John uses have a deeper meaning than what may appear on the surface. As we read this passage, pay attention to when Nicodemus comes to meet Jesus and what this may symbolize.

Read John 3:1-21

Play the clip of “Yanni vs. Laurel” and ask how many hear each of these words.

Even though we are listening to the same sound we have different interpretations of what it means. We are not listening on the same level. Some of us hear one word while others of us hear a different word.

That level of misunderstanding happens in the text that we just read. Nicodemus begins a conversation with Jesus at night. The image of him coming at night suggests that there is some sort of secrecy happening here. Nicodemus does not want to be seen because of what might happen to him.

Throughout the conversation we see that Jesus is speaking on a symbolic or spiritual level while Nicodemus is interpreting the words of Jesus on a literal level. Nicodemus is having a hard time making a connection. But Jesus does not give up. Jesus continues this conversation with Nicodemus and guides him with new understanding about who he is and God's role in his life.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be "born again" or "born from above," the Greek word can be interpreted either way. Nicodemus is confused by this. But then Jesus says that the Spirit blows where it chooses, and it cannot be controlled. But Nicodemus is still confused.

So, Jesus challenges Nicodemus to continue to seek to grow in his faith and to not conclude that he knows all that there is to know. The Spirit will continue to reveal new possibilities to him if he is open to seeing what the Spirit is doing.

These words from Jesus that John records are all about the grace and love of God. Too many times these words about being born again and that belief in Jesus leads to eternal life have been used by church people in harsh and exclusive ways.

We've seen them plastered on signs at sporting events or on signs along the side of the road. But these are not words about condemnation and exclusion. These words about being born again and eternal life in Christ are words about God's grace and love. These are words about believing and following Jesus Christ and being made whole.

Believing in the grace of these words about God loving the world and God loving each person is more difficult for some to believe than others. I invite us now into hearing Harold Shulman share some of his life. Harold says this about his birth:

“I was born the perfect baby, the carrier of my young parent’s dreams and ambitions. But then three days later, I became what some might call a monster. Like ants on honey, a bacterial infection consumed my face, and as quickly as my face disappeared, so did my mother and father. The newborn that my parents had expected to take home and raise as their cherished son was no longer the child they had the courage to claim.

Despite their valiant efforts, the doctors, with their arsenal of antibiotics, proved unable to push back the bacteria’s devastating aggression. When it had finally run its course, my nose, lower right eyelid, tear ducts, lips, and palate had been eaten away, leaving behind a gaping hole.

Abandoned by both parents and stripped of any family, I was made a ward of the state of New Jersey, identified for the next eighteen years of my life as case number XUG-905.

Perhaps my parents assumed or even prayed I would not survive. Or perhaps they believed that without a face, I had become something less than human, incapable of loving and being loved. Their decision left me abandoned.”

Harold ended up in foster care. Then one day when he was 16 he had the following conversation with his foster family.

“Howard, ‘his foster mother Shirl announced one day,’ Dr. Gratz thinks it’s time for you to have another skin graft for your nose. Calmly she assured me this surgery was necessary and gently broke the news that I would have to be hospitalized for a few days.

Crestfallen, I slumped in my chair and stared at the floor, saying nothing. Shirl did her best to convince me that it would all be worth it. I understood full well that a stay in the hospital meant pain, lots of it.

A large nine-by-eight-inch patch of skin was excised from my chest and shoulder, the graft then rolled up and stitched along the seam to create a headless snake of raw, living flesh. One end was then attached under my chin and the other to the tip of my reconstructed nose.

This appendage, left to dangle in front of my face for the next six weeks, constantly reminded me of what I had gone through but gave me no idea of where I was going.

With strict orders not to bathe or shower, and allowed only a careful wash in the sink, I gingerly padded to the small bathroom adjoining my hospital room to dutifully wash up. When I looked up and caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror, I froze.

Staring back at me was a creature more gruesome than the late-night horror-movie monsters I watched on TV. That the alien in the reflection was me, Howard. It was too much. I felt my blood plummet to my feet and slid helplessly down the wall to the cold tile floor. "Why me? Why me?" I sobbed, over and over. God must hate me. What terrible thing did I do to deserve this?"

Harold is not the only one who feels this sense of loneliness and isolation. It is now being reported that 17% of teenagers in the US have contemplated suicide. In the United Kingdom, the government has created a position of Minister of Loneliness because they recognize the impact that loneliness is having on their country.

But the story we read out of John teaches us that those of us in despair need not worry. For God so loves the world. For God so loves Harold. For God so loves anyone who feels lonely. For God so loves the child living in poverty. For God so loves the woman in an abusive relationship.

For God so loves the person battling mental illness. For God so loves the person mourning the death of someone close to them on this Memorial Day. For God so loves all of us that God has sent the son to show us what grace and love is all about.

This act by God was not done out of condemnation but in order that the world might be saved through him.

So today we can hear these words spoken in a fresh way to each of us and to all who are broken and alone. For God loves you and you and you and God loves me. AMEN.

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-Shulman, Harold, http://narrative.ly/as-my-face-disappeared-so-did-my-mother-and-father/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Weekender%20-%2051918&utm_content=Weekender%20-%2051918+CID_9b71fb859952f3000fbe861bb8050fc6&utm_source=Narratively%20Campaign%20Monitor%20Emails&utm_term=Read%20More%20at%20Narratively

-Given: May 27, 2018 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)