

# 3:16

## The Numbers of Hope

**Max Lucado**

Standalone Sermon Outline

## The Most Famous Conversation in the Bible

John 3:1-2

*“A man named Nicodemus ... came to Jesus at night.”*

### **A. Introduction**

It was 1965. The place was Andrews, Texas. Andrews was a city built on oil and soil. The first well there was drilled in 1929—and after that, the people just kept on drilling. By 1965, there were 7,400 oil wells spread out across the county’s 196 oil fields.

Max Lucado was ten years old at the time. Picture a red-headed youth with a tornado of freckles sitting in a Bible class on a Wednesday night. School desks with initials carved in them. A blackboard at the front. A dozen or so kids, some listening, some not. A teacher wearing a suit coat that was too tight to button around his robust belly.

He was talking about Jesus and explaining the cross. Max had heard this message before. But that day he heard it for *sure*. “You can’t save yourself. You need a savior.” Why did it connect that night as opposed to any other? There’s no explanation. But it did. The teacher simply articulated what Max Lucado was beginning to understand. He was lost and needed a redeemer. And God had provided one by sending his only Son. From that night on, Max Lucado’s heart belonged to Jesus.

Some would argue that a ten-year-old is too young for such a decision. They may be right, but the boy knew that he had never made a more earnest decision in his life. And in the weeks and months that followed, Max found a hunger growing inside to learn more about this new life that he had been given. What did it mean to be “born again”? What was required of him?

So, he started to ask questions and have conversations—with his father, mother, and anyone else

who might be knowledgeable about such matters. In doing so, Max Lucado was following a pattern that has been taking place ever since God first revealed his plan of salvation. It's the kind of quest that takes place whenever a person starts to truly grasp the wonder of God's grace. A kind of questioning that we see happening some 2,000 years ago in another dusty town.

## **B. Teaching**

The disciple John sets the scene in motion in the early chapters of his Gospel. In John 3 he writes, "Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.'"

- 1) Now, before we continue, we have to acknowledge there is a lot we don't know about this conversation. Here is what we do know:
  - a) We know it took place somewhere in or around Jerusalem, because in the previous chapter, John tells us that Jesus was there to attend Passover. This implies there were large crowds in the city and not a lot of extra places to rent or sleep. The Lord of the Universe was likely squashed into a little house somewhere on a side street with the rest of his followers. Perhaps this conversation happened in the middle of that house. We can't say for certain. Nor can we say for sure when it took place in the timeline of Jesus' ministry.
  - b) John writes that Nicodemus came to Jesus "at night." This is intriguing, because most of the events recorded in the Bible happened during the daylight hours. That was the time to see and be seen, to teach and to learn, and to ask and answer. But this particular dialogue happened at night. Why would that be important? Because of the one asking the questions. John identifies him as "a Pharisee" and "ruler of the Jews." (John 3:1-2)
  - c) Nicodemus was one of those pharisees, though the word didn't have the same negative flavor back then that it carries today—legalism and hypocrisy.

For Nicodemus, and those like him, to be a Pharisee meant walking and talking and thinking in line with God. It meant discussing God. Seeking how to reach him and please him and appease him.

Whatever God says, Nicodemus wants to know about it. It's his job to understand. He has studied the law. He's a holy man who leads God's holy people. His name appears on the elite list of Torah scholars. He has dedicated his life to the law and occupies one of the seventy-one seats of the Judean supreme court.

Nicodemus has heard the rumors about this Galilean crowd-stopper. Some call him teacher or rabbi. Some say he banishes demons. Others claim he forgives sin. Nicodemus himself had witnessed the moment just a few days before when Jesus purified the temple. He saw the righteous fury of the man—to

those who sold doves Jesus said, “Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!” (John 2:16)

- d) The man from Nazareth won no favor in the temple that day. All of which explains why Nicodemus came to Jesus at *night*. He didn’t want his colleagues to know about the meeting. After all, they wouldn’t understand. But Nicodemus couldn’t wait until they did.

So it was that Nicodemus took a risk in conducting this clandestine conversation with Christ. And it’s a risk that all of us today should be glad that he was willing to take. For out of this short discussion comes one of the most famous verses in all of the Bible.

- 2) Returning to the story, John tells us that Nicodemus began the conversation this way: “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” (John 3:2) Nothing like a little bit of small-talk peppered with flattery to grease the wheels of dialogue.

Jesus doesn’t play the game and issues a proclamation: “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” (John 3:3)

- a) With this proclamation, Jesus carves out the Continental Divide of Scripture. The international date line of faith. Nicodemus stands on one side, Jesus on the other—and Christ pulled no punches about their differences.
- b) Nicodemus inhabited a land of good efforts, sincere gestures, and hard work. Give “God your best,” his philosophy said, “and God does the rest.” Jesus’ response? “Your best won’t do. Your works don’t work. Unless you are born again, you can’t see what God is doing.”
- c) Nicodemus hesitates on behalf of us all. We can imagine him pondering these words, carefully weighing them in his mind. Then he responds with a question that all of us would have asked: “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (John 3:4) Nicodemus is thinking literally here. *Born again? What does that mean. Can you actually put life in reverse and start all over? Is this some kind of joke?*
- d) Jesus doesn’t crack a smile. “Most assuredly, I say to you,” he replies to the perplexed Pharisee, “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” (John 3:5)

- 3) *Born again*. Two important words. But let’s focus on the word *again* for a moment. The Greek language offers two choices for that particular term. The first is *palin*, which means a repetition of an act or to redo what was done earlier. Tennis is a good illustration of the idea. First, one player whacks the ball, and then the other player sends it back across the net. Then the ball gets hit back and forth, back and forth. Tennis is a *palin* kind of sport. The same action repeated over and over by different competitors.

The second Greek term translated as our English word *again* is a bit different. That term is *anōthen*. It also depicts a repeated action, but it requires the original source to repeat it. It means “from above, from a higher place, from things that come from heaven or God.” In other words, the one who did the action the first time is the one to repeat it.

This is the word that Jesus chooses when he tells Nicodemus that he must be born again. Born *anōthen*. The original Creator re-creates his creation. The potter reforms the clay.

Of course, what Jesus is describing is impossible by any earthly standard. That which is born cannot be reborn. Flesh and bone cannot be rewound like an old video cassette. Muscle cannot be remade. Sinews cannot be restrung. It’s mind-boggling for the Pharisee, causing him to exclaim, “How can these things be?” (John 3:9)

- 4) Now, so far, we’ve studied this conversation from a few different angles. We’ve looked at *who* was involved, *what* the motivation was for it, *where* it took place, and *when* it occurred. But we haven’t addressed the key question of *why*. *Why* does John choose to record this conversation near the beginning of his Gospel?

One of the main answers to that question is found in Jesus’ answer to Nicodemus’ question. In that moment, the Savior lays it all on the table. Christ describes the source of his testimony—that he is a witness to heavenly things and heavenly truths. He reveals that he alone has the authority to speak of heaven because he alone has come down from heaven. He foreshadows his future, saying, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” (John 3:14)

- 5) Following this, John records these words that highlight the foundation of our faith: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16) There it is: a twenty-six-word parade of hope beginning with God, ending with life, and urging us to do the same. Brief enough to memorize in a moment, yet solid enough to weather 2,000 years of questions.

If you know nothing of the Bible, this is the place to start. Conversely, if you know everything in the Bible, this is the place to return. For we *all* need the reminder that we “*all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” The heart of the human problem is the heart of the human—and God’s prescription is found in John 3:16. *He loves. He gave. We believe. We live.*

### C. Application:

Many years have passed since the red-headed boy sat in that Bible class back in the dusty town of Andrews, Texas, and for the first time really heard the message of salvation. Most of the details of that time have faded away with the passing of years. But he clearly remembers that night when he listened to the teacher with the tight suit coat and recognized that he needed to be *born again*.

Max Lucado says, “It is a moment that I never want to forget. I want to always remember that I was once lost but God made a way for me to be found by sending his only Son as a sacrifice.”

What about you? Can you remember the moment you encountered God's love? Are you still in love with him? The apostle Paul, in perhaps the last letter he wrote, begged us all to "remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead." When times get hard, remember Jesus. When disappointment is your bed partner, remember Jesus. When fear pitches its tent in your front yard, death looms, or shame weighs heavily . . . remember Jesus.

Has it been a while since you stared at the heavens in amazement of God's grace? Has it been a while since you reflected on the lengths God was willing to go so that you could be with him in eternity? If so, take a moment to reflect on the words of John 3:16. Let's read them together: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."