



# SUNDAY SCHOOL MARCH 1, 2026

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## First Gospel: John 3:1-17

***Context: Today we are reading John 3:1-17, the late-night conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, where Jesus explains what it means to be born again, how God is at work through the Spirit, and why God's love moves toward the world instead of away from it.***

### NICODEMUS VISITS JESUS

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person."

Jesus answered him, "*Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*"

Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus answered, "*Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.*"

*"Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So, it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."*

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

Jesus answered him, "*Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?*"

*"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"*

*"No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*"

*"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*"

*"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him."*

### OVERVIEW

John 3:1-17 is one of the most influential passages in the New Testament.

It centers on a private encounter: Nicodemus, a respected religious leader, comes to Jesus at night with questions.

Jesus answers by reframing the whole conversation: the real issue is not religious achievement, but new birth from above, a transformation initiated by God through the Spirit.



The passage builds toward a clear claim about God's motive and method:

- Motive: God loves the world.
- Method: God gives the Son, not to condemn, but to save.
- Invitation: trust (believe) and live.

## BIBLICAL CONTEXT

### Immediate Context Before (John 2:23-25)

Right before this scene, Jesus is in Jerusalem at Passover. Many “believed” because of the signs, but Jesus does not entrust himself to them because he knows what is in people.

That sets up John 3: Nicodemus comes with sincere curiosity, but Jesus presses beyond sign-based interest into heart-level transformation.

*The story is asking: what kind of belief is real belief?*

### The Passage Itself (John 3:1-17)

Key movements:

- Nicodemus approaches respectfully, acknowledging Jesus as a teacher from God (3:1-2).
- Jesus redirects: “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again/from above” (3:3).
- Nicodemus takes it literally; Jesus clarifies spiritual birth, “born of water and Spirit” (3:4-8).
- Jesus challenges Nicodemus leadership and understanding: “You are Israel’s teacher, and you do not understand?” (3:9-12).
- Jesus introduces the cross in symbolic form: the Son of Man must be “lifted up” like the serpent in the wilderness (3:13-15).
- The core theological summary: God loved the world, gave the Son, offers eternal life to believers, not condemnation (3:16-17).

### Immediate Context After (John 3:18-21 and following)

The very next verses (often not read, but important) clarify that the real divide is not “good people vs bad people” but those who come to the light vs those who avoid it. John 3:19-21 speaks about loving darkness because deeds are evil, and coming into the light so deeds may be seen as done in God.

Then John moves into a scene where John the Baptist points away from himself and toward Jesus (3:22-36). The bigger story keeps stressing: Jesus is the One sent from above; he must increase.

### Broader Narrative and Theological Context of John's Gospel

John is written to reveal who Jesus is so that readers may believe and have life in his name (John 20:31). Major themes include:

- Jesus as the Word made flesh (John 1).
- Signs that reveal identity (turning water to wine, healings, etc.).
- Misunderstanding as a teaching device: characters take Jesus literally, and Jesus uses it to open spiritual meaning (born again, living water, bread of life).
- Light vs darkness, above vs below, belief vs unbelief.



- Eternal life as both present and future: life that begins now, not only after death.

John 3 sits near the beginning as a thesis moment: the life Jesus gives is not a spiritual tune-up; it is new birth.

#### HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

Nicodemus is a Pharisee and “a ruler of the Jews” (likely connected to the Sanhedrin). In first-century Judea, religion and politics were inseparable:

- Rome governed the region, but allowed limited religious self-administration.
- The temple system, priestly leadership, and various Jewish groups (Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots) debated identity, purity, and faithfulness under occupation.
- Pharisees emphasized Torah observance and boundary markers that helped preserve Jewish identity in a world of pressure and compromise.

So, Nicodemus represents a serious religious leader trying to interpret God’s activity in a volatile, politically charged environment. When he comes “at night,” it may imply caution, fear of reputation, or simply a literary symbol in John: darkness vs light.

Also important: “kingdom of God” language had political edge. Many Jews longed for God’s reign to replace oppressive rule. Jesus does not deny the kingdom, but he insists entrance is not through power, pedigree, or performance. It comes through spiritual rebirth.

#### HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

- Jesus earthly ministry: roughly late 20s to around 30 CE (exact dating debated).
- This scene occurs early in John’s narrative, soon after Passover in Jerusalem (John 2).
- John’s Gospel likely written late first century (often placed around 90s CE, though scholars debate a range).
- The Gospel reflects a post-resurrection, post-temple-destruction context (the temple was destroyed in 70 CE). John often addresses Jewish-Christian tensions and the question: who truly belongs to God?

#### BIBLE TRANSLATION UNDERSTANDING

##### Original Language and Dating

- The Gospel of John was written in Greek.
- John 3:1-17 uses layered Greek terms that are hard to flatten into one English phrase.

##### Major Stages of English Translation (Very Brief)

- Early English: Wycliffe (from Latin), then Tyndale (from Greek), then the King James Version.
- Modern critical-text era: translations based on older manuscripts and improved textual comparison (RSV, NIV, NRSV, ESV, NASB, CSB, etc.).
- Translation philosophies vary: word-for-word vs thought-for-thought, affecting how John 3 reads.

##### Theologically Significant Translation Choices

- “Born again” vs “born from above”
  - The Greek word can mean both “again” and “from above.”



- ***Nicodemus hears “again” (a second time). Jesus likely means “from above” (from God).***
- This is not just starting over by willpower. It is receiving life originating in God.
- “Believe”
  - In John, belief is not merely agreeing with facts. It implies trusting, relying on, entrusting oneself to Jesus.
- “Eternal life”
  - Not only endless duration, but a quality of life belonging to the age of Gods reign, beginning now.
- “World”
  - In John, “world” can mean humanity in rebellion and need, the broken system, and also the beloved object of Gods rescue.
  - **John 3:16 is startling because it says God loves the world, not just the religious insiders.**
- “Condemn”
  - **Can include judge, evaluate, sentence. John 3:17 stresses the Son is not sent as a prosecutor but as a rescuer.**

SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION WITH MODERN-DAY & GRANT COUNTY CONTEXT

A helpful metaphorical lens for John 3 is “conversion of imagination.”

***Nicodemus comes with a religious map: if we do the right things, we can locate the kingdom. Jesus says the kingdom cannot be managed like a checklist. It is entered like a birth: it is received, not achieved.***

Think of it like this:

- Nicodemus represents the respectable, well-informed, rule-keeping side of faith.
- Jesus introduces a reality that cannot be controlled: the Spirit is like wind, undeniable but uncontainable.

Grant County connection (without picking parties, just naming human patterns):

- In small-town life, reputation matters. We learn which conversations are safe, which questions are risky, and which topics get you labeled.
- Nicodemus comes at night because daylight has consequences.
- Many of us have “night questions”: doubts, regrets, family wounds, private grief, secret fears, quiet shame, or spiritual fatigue.
- Jesus does not shame the night visitor. He meets him there and invites him into something new.

And this is the punchline that can reshape a whole community:

- God does not start with condemnation.
- God starts with love for the world, meaning the messy, divided, stubborn, exhausted world, including our neighborhoods, our schools, our workplaces, our churches, our families.

A scholarly theme here is that John redefines salvation as participation in Gods life:

- Not “God tolerates you because you behaved.”
- But “God gives you new birth so you can live differently from the inside out.”



## *The mission is rescue, not rage.*

### HOW SHOULD WE ACT AND REACT TO THIS SCRIPTURE TODAY?

- Make room for honest questions
  - Nicodemus is not mocked for asking. Create space for sincere curiosity in your class and church.
- Stop treating faith like a performance review
  - New birth is gift before it is effort. Obedience matters, but it flows from transformed life, not fear.
- Practice light-inviting honesty
  - John 3:20-21 (right after our passage) suggests people avoid light when they fear exposure.
  - Church should be the safest place to tell the truth, not the most dangerous.
- Replace condemnation reflex with rescue reflex
  - Jesus' posture is saving, healing, lifting, restoring.
  - That should shape how we talk about outsiders, sinners, politics, addiction, poverty, immigration, homelessness, and anything else that triggers judgment.
- Trust the Spirits work more than your control
  - The wind goes where it wishes. We participate, we do not manage God.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Why do you think Nicodemus came at night? What are modern "night conversations" people still have with God?*
2. *When you hear "born again," what assumptions come to mind? How does "born from above" change the tone?*
3. *What is the difference between believing facts about Jesus and trusting Jesus?*
4. *John 3:17 says Jesus was not sent to condemn the world. How does that challenge the way Christians sometimes sound?*
5. *What is one way our church culture might unintentionally make people hide in the dark rather than come into the light?*



## Second Gospel: Matthew 17:1-9

*Context: Today we are hearing the story Christians often call “The Transfiguration,” when Jesus lets a few close disciples see, for a moment, who He truly is - and they are told to listen to Him.*

### THE TRANSFIGURATION

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.

And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light.

Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.

But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.”

And when they raised their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

### OVERVIEW

Matthew 17:1-9 is a mountaintop moment that answers a ground-level question: “Who is Jesus, really?” Peter, James, and John see Jesus radiant with glory, speaking with Moses and Elijah (the Law and the Prophets), and they hear God’s voice affirming Jesus as Son and commanding, “Listen to him.” The scene is both comfort (Jesus is who He said He is) and correction (do not freeze faith in a spectacular moment; follow Jesus back down the mountain).

### BIBLICAL CONTEXT

#### **The Scripture Immediately Before (Matthew 16:24-28)**

Right before this, Jesus talks about discipleship as cross-bearing: deny yourself, take up your cross, follow me. He also says some standing there will not taste death before they see “the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” The Transfiguration functions like a preview: a glimpse of kingdom glory that strengthens them for the coming suffering.

#### **The Scripture Immediately After (Matthew 17:10-13 and 17:14-21)**

Right after, the disciples ask about Elijah. Jesus connects Elijah to John the Baptist and hints again at rejection and suffering. Then they come down the mountain to a messy situation: a boy



in crisis, a father desperate, disciples confused, and Jesus doing healing work. Matthew places the bright, mystical moment next to the ordinary pain of real life.

**Key idea:** The mountaintop is for clarity; the valley is where love gets practiced.

### Broader Narrative and Theological Context in Matthew

Matthew consistently presents Jesus as:

- The fulfillment of Israel’s story (fulfills Scripture, embodies faithful Israel)
- The true teacher of God’s will (Sermon on the Mount, parables, repeated “You have heard... but I say...”)
- The promised Messiah and Son of God
- The one who brings the kingdom of heaven near

*This passage sits in the middle of a turning point in Matthew’s Gospel. After Peter confesses Jesus as Messiah (Matthew 16:16) Jesus begins speaking plainly about suffering, death, and resurrection. The Transfiguration confirms that the coming suffering is not a defeat of Jesus’ identity; it is the path He willingly walks as God’s chosen Son.*

### HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

First-century Jewish life in Roman-occupied Judea and Galilee was saturated with expectation and tension:

- Rome held power through local rulers, taxation, and force.
- Many longed for deliverance and a Messiah who would set things right.
- Religious leadership was complex: priestly systems tied to temple life, teachers and interpreters of Torah, and multiple movements (not one monolithic “Judaism”).

In that world, declaring someone “Son of God” and “chosen” had weight. It was not only a spiritual claim; it implied authority. But the Transfiguration deliberately frames Jesus’ authority as faithful to Israel’s story (Moses and Elijah) and centered on listening to Jesus rather than building a political platform.

Also, mountaintop imagery mattered. In Israel’s Scriptures, mountains are places where heaven and earth seem to meet: Moses encounters God on Sinai; Elijah encounters God at Horeb. Matthew is intentionally pulling that thread: Jesus is not merely another prophet; He is the beloved Son to whom the story has been pointing.

### HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

- Events of Jesus’ ministry: commonly placed around AD 27-30 (approximate; scholars debate exact dates).
- Matthew’s Gospel: commonly dated somewhere between about AD 70-90 (also debated; the range reflects differing scholarly judgments about how Matthew relates to Mark and the destruction of the temple).
- The setting is Roman rule in the eastern Mediterranean, with Judea and Galilee under imperial oversight and local client governance.



## BIBLE TRANSLATION UNDERSTANDING

### Original Language and Dating

Matthew was written in Greek. The Greek style and vocabulary show it is composed for a community that knows Israel's Scriptures (often cited from the Greek Old Testament tradition) and is wrestling with what it means to follow Jesus as Messiah.

### Major Stages of English Translation (Very Brief)

- Early church used Greek manuscripts; later Latin translations became dominant in the West.
- Wycliffe (Middle English) translated from Latin.
- Tyndale and later English translations drew heavily from Greek manuscripts (and Hebrew for the Old Testament).
- King James Version shaped English religious vocabulary deeply.
- Modern translations vary by philosophy: more “word-for-word” (formal) versus more “thought-for-thought” (dynamic), plus a range of hybrids.

### Theologically Significant Translation Choices in This Passage

- “Transfigured”: not merely “changed clothes” or “looked bright,” but “transformed in form/appearance.” It suggests a revealing, not a costume change.
- “His face shone like the sun”: evokes Moses' radiant face after meeting God, but intensified. In Matthew, it reads as divine glory shining through Jesus.
- “This is my beloved Son... with whom I am well pleased”: echoes language used at Jesus' baptism. Translation keeps “beloved” as relational and covenantal, not just affectionate.
- “Listen to him”: the verb carries the sense of heed, obey, take seriously. Not “hear noise,” but “receive and follow.”

## SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION WITH MODERN-DAY & GRANT COUNTY CONTEXT

A helpful scholarly way to read the Transfiguration is as an “apocalyptic unveiling”. For a moment, the curtain is pulled back. The disciples see reality as it truly is, not as it appears in ordinary lighting.

Metaphorically, the story speaks to:

- **The tension between spectacle and obedience:**  
Peter wants to build shelters and preserve the moment. It is understandable. We all want to hold onto experiences that feel pure and certain. But the voice from the cloud does not say, “Capture this.” It says, “Listen to him.” **In other words: faith is not mainly about keeping the mountaintop; it is about following the voice.**
- **The integration of tradition and living guidance:**  
Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets - the backbone of Israel's faith. They appear, but they do not take center stage. Jesus does. That is a metaphor for how tradition works best: it points beyond itself to the living Word and the living way.
- **The rhythm of revelation and return:**  
They go up, they see, they come down. The purpose of the mountaintop is not escape; it is formation for service.



### Grant County angle (without getting weirdly specific, but keeping it real):

- A lot of people here know what it is like to want “simple certainty,” especially when life feels like it is moving too fast, culture feels confusing, or trust feels thin. It is tempting to build three booths: one for our favorite religious moment, one for our favorite political story, and one for our favorite memory of how life used to be.
- **The Transfiguration nudges us:** do not confuse nostalgia, adrenaline, or tribe loyalty with the voice of God. The test is not, “Did it feel powerful?” The test is, “Does it lead me to listen to Jesus and love my neighbor better when I go back down the hill?”
- In a community shaped by hard work, loyalty, and habit, this passage invites a gentle re-centering: not “work harder to be good,” but **“listen deeper to Jesus, then act with courage and mercy in plain daylight.”**

### HOW SHOULD WE ACT AND REACT TO THIS SCRIPTURE TODAY?

- Seek clarity, not just comfort. Pray for the ability to recognize Jesus as He is, not as we wish Him to be.
- Do not idolize spiritual highs. Gratitude for mountaintop moments is good. Building your whole faith on them is fragile.
- Let Jesus interpret your tradition. Read Scripture seriously, but keep asking: “How does Jesus fulfill and reframe this?”
- Practice listening as obedience. “Listen to him” becomes concrete in forgiveness, honesty, generosity, peacemaking, and compassion.
- Carry glory into the valley. The next scene after the mountain is need, confusion, and suffering. That is where Christlike love becomes visible.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Peter wants to build shelters. What are our modern “booths” - the things we build to preserve a feeling, an identity, or a moment?*
2. *What does it mean to “listen to Jesus” in a way that costs us something?*
3. *The disciples are told not to talk about it until after the resurrection. Why might timing matter in sharing spiritual experiences?*
4. *Where is your “mountain” right now (clarity, worship, insight)? Where is your “valley” (need, conflict, fatigue)? How do you carry one into the other?*
5. *In a polarized environment, how can “listen to him” become a filter for what we repeat, post, assume, or condemn?*



## Addendum

### John 3:1-17 — If It Were Said Today (Paraphrased)

There was a respected church leader named Nick. He knew his Bible, knew his theology, and knew how to stay respectable. One evening, when the town had settled down and no one was watching, he went to talk with Jesus.

“Rabbi,” he said, “we can tell you are from God. Nobody can do what you do unless God is with him.”

Jesus looked at him and said, “Nick, you are missing the main thing. You cannot recognize what God is doing unless you get a whole new kind of life ... a life that comes from above.”

Nick blinked. “A new life? What do you mean? You cannot start over like a baby.”

Jesus said, “I am not talking about pretending. I am talking about being remade. People get born physically from their parents, but spiritual life is born from God’s Spirit. Do not be surprised that I am saying you need new birth. The Spirit moves like the wind: you cannot control it, but you can see what it does.”

Nick said, “How can that be?”

Jesus replied, “You are a teacher, and this is new to you? I am telling you what I know. God’s rescue plan is not climbing up to God, it is God coming down to us. And just like Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so dying people could live, the Son of Man will be lifted up so anyone who trusts him can have real life.”

Because this is the truth: God loved the world, the whole broken mess of it, so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that anyone who trusts him will not be lost but will have eternal life.

God did not send the Son to pile on shame. God sent the Son to save.

### Matthew 17:1-19 — If It Were Said Today (Plain English)

Six days later, Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them away from the noise to a quiet place up on a high ridge. While they watched, something about Jesus changed - not like a makeover, but like the real Him was shining through. His face looked bright like the sun, and even His clothes seemed to glow.

Then Moses and Elijah showed up, talking with Him.

Peter blurted out, “Lord, this is amazing. If you want, I will set up three tents - one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. We can stay here.”

But while he was still talking, a thick cloud covered them, and a voice came from it: “This is my Son. I love him. He is the one I have chosen. Listen to him.”

The disciples dropped to the ground, terrified.

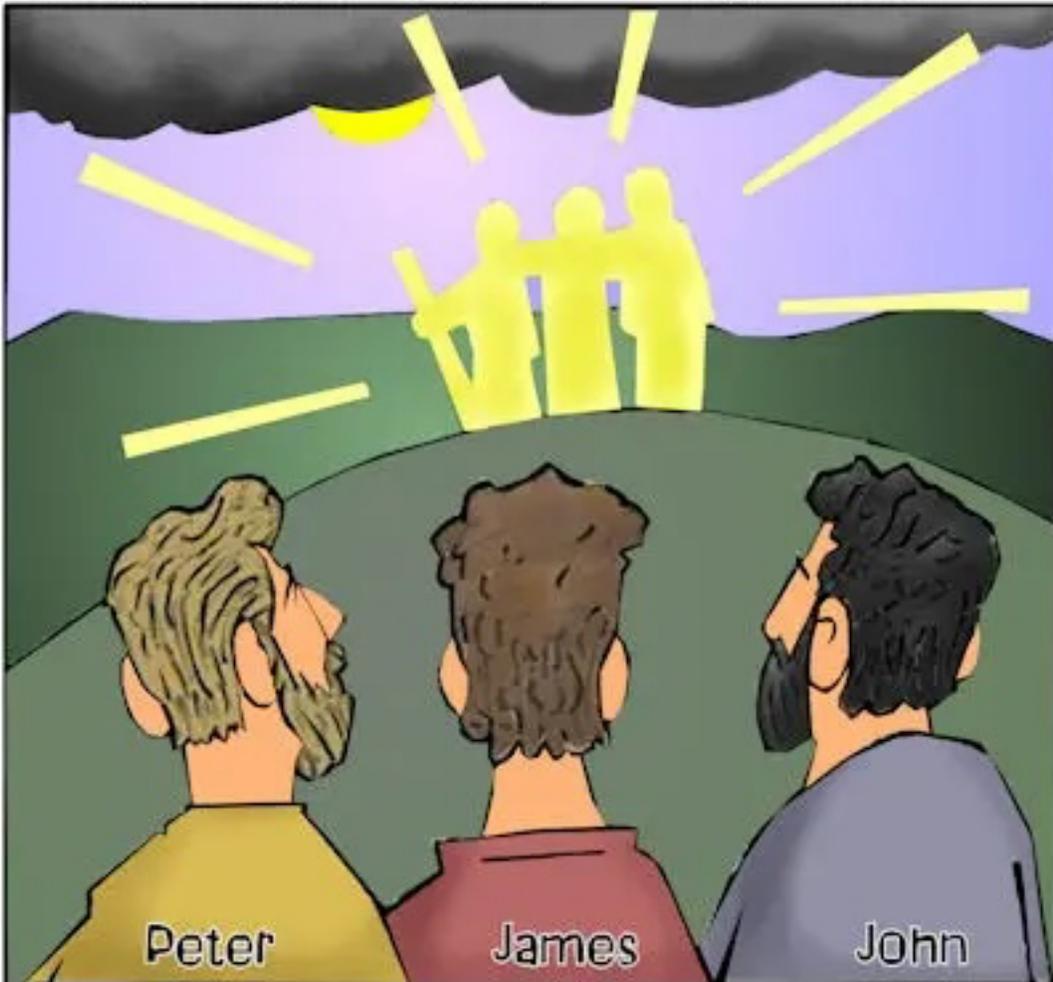
Jesus came over, touched them, and said, “Get up. Do not be afraid.”

When they looked up, Moses and Elijah were gone. It was only Jesus.

As they walked back down, Jesus told them, “Do not tell anyone what you saw until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”



# The Back Pew - Jeff Larson



Close Encounters of the Transfiguration Kind  
**Mt 17:3, Mk 9:2-13, Lk 9:28-36**