

# Crisis of Faith

“I’m a Good Person, Why Do I Need to be Saved?”

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## Intro

**Grab a bible and go to John 3.** Wrapping up our Crisis of Faith series heading into Easter next weekend. Big idea is that all of us, Christian or not, come upon certain aspects of life that force us to question, “Is following Jesus a good idea or not?” In light of my circumstances; my disappointment; my suffering; my doubts; my desire for a wealthy, successful life... is following Jesus a good idea anyway?

Today we’re looking at one of the sneakiest crisis of faith issues that runs rampant here in the religious south; it’s a virus that devastates spiritual vitality and, we are all completely blind and susceptible to it always. Sounds fun, right? Here we go:

### John 3:1-2

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “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.”

Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. My kids like to call him as Nic at night. “Why does he come at night?”. Night = secrecy; sneakiness. Two viable options.

### Option 1

What I heard growing up is that he’s legitimately interested in Jesus; he’s spiritually seeking with heartfelt sincerity, but he’s embarrassed because Jesus was unpopular with his Pharisee peers, so he’s coming at night out of fear/secrecy. Possible.

### Option 2

But I recently heard what I find to be a more compelling interpretation: Nicodemus is part of the Sanhedrin, the ruling class of spiritual elites in Israel. They were the final authority on Jewish law which meant part of their job was to investigate any teacher, any rabbi, any scholar and make sure their teaching was kosher. They took this job *very* seriously. Any teacher who was out of line could be put to death as a *zaken mamrei* (rebellious elder).

So, it seems most likely to me that Nicodemus is investigating Jesus as part of his job. He's not actually spiritually seeking. He comes to Jesus saying, "Ok young Rabbi, there's a lot of concern about you in the Sanhedrin. People don't really like you. But I'm one of the good guys. And I represent a small faction that knows you're one of the good guys. So, let's talk." Almost a bit of back-door politicking. --> Either way, Jesus responds by blowing up Nicodemus' worldview.

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

Jesus' answer to Nic is You must be born again. He doesn't affirm him, “Oh thank you strong, older wiser Rabbi who's in the know. I'm so glad to know you think I'm one of the good guys like you.” He says, “Quit acting like you've got everything spiritual figured out when the truth is you are blind and need a whole new spiritual birth.” As if to prove Jesus' point, like the good religious guy Nic is, he completely misses the metaphor. Takes it 100% literally.

4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Nah man. I'm talking about a spiritual new birth. The phrase "born again" in v. 3 - "gennao anothan" can mean born again, but it can also mean born from above. As Jesus says it here, it means both. We need new birth, from above.

--> And before we go in on what spiritual new birth means, I need to make sure we see what Jesus is confronting here in Nicodemus... and in us. -->

**Nicodemus crisis of faith issue is his works-righteousness.** That's the theological term. Or in more common language; he thinks he's a good person on his own. It can also be called self-righteousness. He thinks He's good in and of himself; of his own doing; because of his own good deeds and record. Why would he need to be born again?

See when we hear of someone being born again; what tends to come to mind is a very emotional experience for someone who's hit rock bottom; dealing with substance abuse or secret sin. That certainly can be the case, but that doesn't apply to ol' Saint Nic at all: he's squeaky clean. Here's what we know about Nicodemus. He was older. Part of the Sanhedrin. Learned. One of Israel's teachers. He's the establishment; culturally and intellectually elite. As a Pharisee, he's also incredibly moral. At least outwardly. Pharisees studied the Old Testament in depth and believed there were 613 distinct commandments in the OT scriptures.

But amid all his religious goodness lies the problem: **he thinks he's good on his own and therefore has no need of Jesus.**

I think the most helpful picture of self-righteousness is the idea of building a moral, spiritual **resume**. Ray's dad growing up. Always be updating your resume. Always be shopping yourself around looking for better job opportunities. So, long as you're only looking for jobs in Columbia, that could be fine advice for your career. But at a spiritual level, this is devastating.

When you're constantly resume building, and shopping your resume you feel this intense internal pressure to justify your existence at all times. "This is what makes me a good person. This is why you should like me. This is how I contribute and make the world a better place."

And there's a religious version of resume building - "I go to church. I take God's Word seriously. I follow God's rules. I tithe. Christian radio. I have some Scriptures posted in prominent positions around my house. And there's a secular version of resume building that has nothing to do with God or religion. I try to be kind to others. I'm tolerant of people who aren't like me. I don't cheat at my job. I care deeply about animals. I even shop at Whole Foods and bring my own bags."

### **Expose self-righteousness**

- Comparison. Politics - "You voted for who??"
- Married people - Likely your whole first year of marriage (or your whole marriage) was marked by self-righteousness... it shows up in how often you got really judgy about all the stupid ways your spouse does things. You put the butter where? On the counter? Like a caveman who hasn't heard of modern refrigeration? Oh, excuse me, I'm sorry. Yes, please do show me again the idiotic way you fold your laundry.
- Parenting - judge ourselves and play the comparison game with other parents. Death by mommy law. We also get self-righteous with our kids. Any time you find yourself saying, "I can't believe you did that! How could you have possibly lied? Ughhhh... I would never..."
- Spiritual exhaustion. So, tiresome to keep feeling like you must perform for God.

- Should all over yourselves.
- Can't handle suffering. - WHY ME God?! I'm one of the good guys.
- Self-reliance. I don't need help from anybody.
- Diagnostic questions: Who do you compare yourself to and look down on? What kind of people really bother you? How frequently do you enjoy spending time with God? Prayerlessness = self-reliance = self-righteousness.

And whether you're doing this religiously or not, it all boils down to the same thing. **What makes me right with God (or the universe), and other people and myself, is my goodness.**

Jesus confronts this overtly. **No. You must be born again.** You don't need some self-improvement, self-discovery, a new technique or better therapy... All those things could be somewhat helpful but none of them will deal with the root problem.

Because the root issue is: You must be born again.

Which for Nicodemus this had to have been very hard to hear. His whole life He's done everything right. He had to make it as a Pharisee. And Jesus says, "Ok give up all of that and start over. All the prestige, confidence, sense of right-standing you thought that gave you. Start all over as a baby." "Excuse me? But look at all of what I've done."

Yup exactly. Ok, well what does that mean exactly? And how do I do that? Look at v. 13 -

13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

With our resume building, we're all trying to ascend into heaven. Jesus says not possible.

I heard someone once describe works-righteousness as tying a mouse to an 18-wheeler stuck in a ditch. And believing that the mouse can pull the 18-wheeler out if it just keeps whipping itself harder and harder. Some of you this is what your entire spiritual life has felt like. Whipping yourself doing the best you can to try to follow the rules to make God proud.

Jesus says not possible. So, the Son of Man, a Savior sent from God had to descend from heaven. Because we can't get there on our own. And in v. 14 Jesus makes references an obscure little story in the Old Testament that answers our question. **What does it mean to be born again?**

14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

**Numbers 21:4-9.** Short, weird little story. Only 6 verses long. The Israelites are actively being rescued from slavery in Egypt when they go into one of their nationwide temper tantrums; whining; losing faith; grumbling against God and Moses. "Ughhh, it'd be better if God had just left us in Egypt." Completely forget God's kindness and goodness and start trusting in other gods.

So, God sends fiery snakes into the camp. Everywhere. Thousands of them. Some of you this is your phobia. Planet earth 2. The people are being bitten and begin to wail in pain and cry out to God. That is the picture Jesus uses here to describe our spiritual condition. We are snakebit with sin.

There is venomous toxin coursing through our veins killing us. And we try to numb ourselves to it with entertainment and hobbies and busyness but deep down in our souls there is a burning unfixable ache because of the brokenness of the world and our lives.

This may be one of Jesus' least popular spiritual ideas for you. "C'mon really? I knew this is what I was going to get in church. We're all bad sinful people. Lots of shaming. I don't know man. I don't think I buy it. Aren't we all just good people?"

### **Keys?**

Of course. Of course. We're all awesome. And... do you have keys?" Why is that?

If you wake up in the middle of the night hearing noises. Someone is downstairs in your kitchen... what's your thought? Yay! I bet they're cleaning up and making me a pie. Are you sure you believe people are essentially good?

### **Human trafficking.**

Conversation with a friend the other day. - "We're moving in a direction where slavery will never again be widespread accepted..." It's a great fanciful modern humanistic notion. Except for the facts that say there are currently more people enslaved in the world than at any other time in recorded history. I told him that and he said, "Well yeah, but not here. Not here in America." Google search Columbia, SC human trafficking busts.

Jesus' assessment of Nicodemus is an accurate description of us: we're snakebit with sin and we're blind to it. We think we're good. We think we don't need help. And all the ways we keep building and shopping our resumes are part of the problem.

### **Tim Keller**

Nearly everyone defines sin as breaking a list of rules. Jesus, though, shows us that a man who has violated virtually nothing on the list of moral misbehaviors can be every bit as spiritually lost as the most profligate, immoral person. Why? Because sin is not just breaking the rules, it is putting yourself in the place of God as Savior, Lord, and Judge. We must learn how to repent of the sin under all our other sins and under all our righteousness — the sin of seeking to be our own Savior and Lord. We must admit that we've put our ultimate hope and trust in things other than God, and that in both our wrongdoing and right doing we have been seeking to get around God or get control of God to get hold of those things.

This is the problem with works-righteousness. As one pastor, John Gerstner, put it we don't just need to repent of our obvious bad sins. **We need to repent of our "damnable good works."**

But God, rich in mercy, knowing the desperate sinful condition of His people and knowing what He was going to do the whole time tells Moses to make a bronze image of one of the serpents, and put it high up on a pole. And He tells His people that if they can get their eyes on that, and look at in faith, they will be healed. So, imagine people, riling in pain, gasping and crawling in desperation to get a view of this serpent.

...so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Jesus, like this bronze snake was lifted up on a pole, so that all who looked to him would be saved. It used to confuse me, bother me, when I first learned about this as a kid, that God chose a serpent to depict his son. Why not a lamb? Or a lion? But then I realized that the serpents were the result of their sin. And like 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, Jesus who knew no sin, became sin for us. He took the result of our sin onto Himself. He became the snake bit one so we could be healed...

### **We had sinned, the viper of sin and death bit Jesus.**

And what we need to do to be born again is, "Look." That's it. That's how we are born again. Through absolutely no works of our own, but instead repenting of our self-righteousness and looking to the Son of Man who was lifted up on the pole; the righteous son of God who was snakebit for our sinfulness.

And in our self-righteousness; to just look requires an absolute act of repentance. A complete change in belief. We must reject our own resumes to accept Jesus' resume given in our place. We must repent from trying to ascend to heaven on our own and accept the one who descended to earth and was raised up on a pole in our place.

"But, but, but... I'll be good." No, no, no just look.

"Can't I just go to church a lot?" No, look.

"But I'll vote the right way and fight for the right politics!" Look to Jesus.

"I'll volunteer lots of hours with the homeless!" That's so great I'm glad you're doing that and, you're going to have to look.

"I'll help others look to Jesus. I'll do Kidtown, student groups, YoungLife, I'll be the most on mission missional person the world has ever seen." Neat. you going to look?

Just looking means we must accept the reality of how desperate our spiritual condition really is. Works-righteousness is a desperate attempt to hide from and numb ourselves to the fact that we are all desperate. But we are snakebit with sin. And we needed the son of God to be snakebit in our place.

## **Conclusion**

As we bring our series to a close, I'm going to give us an opportunity to immediately apply Jesus' call for us to look to Him and come to the light. I'm going to ask you to do something that requires a little courage.

Throughout this series, we've hit 6 different crisis of faith issues:

- Week 1 - intellectual, rational doubts. Isn't faith irrational?
- Week 2 - disappointment doubt - why isn't my life going how I hoped?
- Week 3 - shame. how could God love someone like me?
- Week 4 - loving money more than Jesus.
- Week 5 - suffering
- Week 6 - works righteousness; believing I'm good on my own and don't need Jesus.

What I want you to do is ask yourself: which of the crisis of faith issues that we talked about in this series are you struggling with the most? Currently or in your life?

And what I'm going to do is invite us as groups to stand up when I call your issue. Then I'm going to ask other people to pray for you. And then we're going to read a confession together.

You may be thinking "This is weird. I'm uncomfortable." But here's our heart - Jesus calls us out of hiding. Out of darkness. Out of acting like we're fine and can deal with life on our own. I'm just inviting you to be honest about your need for Jesus and get prayed for. If you're uncomfortable, the simple solution is just don't do it. No one will ever know.

We're going to do it as three pairs that relate to each other:

### **Pair 1 - Shame and Self-righteousness**

The first pair will be shame and religion because both center on this idea that I cannot simply come to God as I am to receive His grace. Self-righteousness says I'm so good that I don't need to come to God. Shame says I'm so bad that I cannot come to God. Both are lies and God's grace to us in Jesus confronts them and calls us to draw near to the throne of grace right now, as we are, with all our sinfulness, to find healing and hope.

If you would say that shame or self-righteousness is the biggest crisis of faith issue that you are struggling with right now, in the spirit of being church family and walking in the light, I invite you to stand up now.

### **Confession**

Father, I struggle to believe that you could really love the real me. I'm desperate to hide my baggage, my sinful thoughts and my shame. I believe I must work hard to prove my worth. I'm scared that I can never do enough to earn your love. I wear masks and play religious games, hoping that You and others will accept a fake version of myself. I am not as good or strong or grand as I've tried to convince myself. And my sin is not so great that Your grace can't overcome it.

### **Assurance of Pardon**

#### **Hebrews 4:14-16**

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. **15** For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. **16** Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

### **Pair 2 - Money and Disappointment Doubt**

Our second pair will be money and disappointment because both converge on the idea that God owes us a certain quality and standard of living. The struggle here is that if Jesus doesn't give to me the life I want, then I don't know if I can or should follow Him.

If you'd say that money or disappointment is the biggest crisis of faith issue that you are struggling with, in the spirit of being church family and walking in the light, I invite you to stand.

### **Confession**

Father, all that this world offers is attractive and distracts me from You. I live as if there is a quality of life that could satisfy me outside of You. I struggle to remember that You are beautiful in and of yourself. I treat you as a useful cosmic busboy who exists to provide me with things. I keep believing bigger, better and more will satisfy me. Remind me that You are the greatest treasure.

### **Assurance of Pardon**

#### **Matthew 6:25-26**

"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? **26** Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than the birds?"

#### **2 Corinthians 8:9**

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.

### **Pair 3 - Intellectual Doubts and Suffering**

Our final pair is intellectual doubts and suffering. While they seem very different, they share a deep mental and emotional wrestling with the biggest and simplest questions of all: God are you there? And are you good?

If intellectual doubts or suffering is the biggest crisis of faith issue that you are struggling with, in the spirit of being church family and walking in the light, I invite you to stand.

### **Confession**

Father, I'm struggling to trust that you are there. And if you are there, I'm struggling to believe that you're good. This world is so broken. How can I know that you're trustworthy? I feel and see the suffering of this world in myself and others. And sometimes the questions won't let me rest. I trust my own mind and feelings more than I trust your unchanging love. Help me to doubt my doubts and learn to rest in the truth of who you are.

### **Assurance of Pardon**

#### **John 20:26-27**

Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe."

#### **1 Peter 5:10**

And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.