

3:16

THE NUMBERS OF HOPE

MAX LUCADO



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO BEIJING

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1



THE MOST FAMOUS
CONVERSATION
IN THE BIBLE

He's waiting for the shadows. Darkness will afford the cover he covets. So he waits for the safety of nightfall. He sits near the second-floor window of his house, sipping olive-leaf tea, watching the sunset, biding his time. Jerusalem enchants at this hour. The disappearing sunlight tints the stone streets, gilds the white houses, and highlights the blockish temple.

Nicodemus looks across the slate roofs at the massive square: gleaming and resplendent. He walked its courtyard this morning. He'll do so again tomorrow. He'll gather with religious leaders and do what religious leaders do: discuss God. Discuss reaching God, pleasing God, appeasing God.

God.

Pharisees converse about God. And Nicodemus sits among them. Debating. Pondering. Solving puzzles. Resolving dilemmas. *Sandal-tying on the Sabbath. Feeding people who won't work. Divorcing your wife. Dishonoring parents.*

What does God say? Nicodemus needs to know. It's his job. He's a holy man and leads holy men. His name appears on the elite list of Torah scholars. He dedicated his life to the law and occupies one of the seventy-one seats of the Judean supreme court. He has credentials, clout, and questions.

Questions for this Galilean crowd-stopper. This backwater teacher who lacks diplomas yet attracts people. Who has ample time for the happy-hour crowd but little time for clergy and the holy upper crust. He banishes demons, some say; forgives sin, others claim; purifies temples, Nicodemus has no doubt. He witnessed Jesus purge Solomon's Porch.¹ He saw the fury. Braided whip, flying doves. "There will be no pocket padding in my house!" Jesus erupted. By the time the dust settled and coins landed, hustling clerics were running a background check on him. The man from Nazareth won no favor in the temple that day.

So Nicodemus comes at night. His colleagues can't know of the meeting. They wouldn't understand. But Nicodemus can't wait until they do. As the shadows darken the city, he steps out, slips unseen through the cobbled, winding streets. He passes servants lighting lamps in the courtyards and takes a path that ends at the door of a simple house. Jesus and his followers are staying here, he's been told. Nicodemus knocks.

The noisy room silences as he enters. The men are wharf workers and tax collectors, unaccustomed to the highbrow world of a scholar. They shift in their seats. Jesus motions for the guest to sit. Nicodemus does and initiates the most famous conversation in the Bible: "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 NKJV).

Nicodemus begins with what he “knows.” *I’ve done my homework*, he implies. *Your work impresses me*.

We listen for a kindred salutation from Jesus: “And I’ve heard of you, Nicodemus.” We expect, and Nicodemus expected, some hospitable chitchat.

None comes. Jesus makes no mention of Nicodemus’s VIP status, good intentions, or academic credentials, not because they don’t exist, but because, in Jesus’s algorithm, they don’t matter. He simply issues this proclamation: “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v. 3 NKJV).

Behold the Continental Divide of Scripture, the international date line of faith. Nicodemus stands on one side, Jesus on the other, and Christ pulls no punches about their differences.

Nicodemus inhabits a land of good efforts, sincere gestures, and hard work. Give God your best, his philosophy says, and God does the rest.

Jesus’s response? Your best won’t do. Your works don’t work. Your finest efforts don’t mean squat. Unless you are born again, you can’t even see what God is up to.

Nicodemus hesitates on behalf of us all. Born again? “How can a man be born when he is old?” (v. 4 NKJV). You must be kidding. Put life in reverse? Rewind the tape? Start all over? We can’t be born again.

Oh, but wouldn’t we like to? A do-over. A try-again. A reload. Broken hearts and missed opportunities bob in our wake. A muligan would be nice. Who wouldn’t cherish a second shot? But who can pull it off? Nicodemus scratches his chin and chuckles. “Yeah, a graybeard like me gets a maternity-ward recall.”

Jesus doesn’t crack a smile. “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the

kingdom of God” (v. 5 NKJV). About this time a gust of wind blows a few leaves through the still-open door. Jesus picks one off the floor and holds it up. God’s power works like that wind, Jesus explains. Newborn hearts are born of heaven. You can’t wish, earn, or create one. New birth? Inconceivable. God handles the task, start to finish.

Nicodemus looks around the room at the followers. Their blank expressions betray equal bewilderment.

Old Nick has no hook upon which to hang such thoughts. He speaks self-fix. But Jesus speaks—indeed introduces—a different language. Not works born of men and women, but a work done by God.

Born again. Birth, by definition, is a passive act. The enwombed child contributes nothing to the delivery. Postpartum celebrations applaud the work of the mother. No one lionizes the infant. (“Great work there, little one.”) No, give the tyke a pacifier not a medal. Mom deserves the gold. She exerts the effort. She pushes, agonizes, and delivers.

When my niece bore her first child, she invited her brother and mother to stand in the delivery room. After witnessing three hours of pushing, when the baby finally crowned, my nephew turned to his mom and said, “I’m sorry for every time I talked back to you.”

The mother pays the price of birth. She doesn’t enlist the child’s assistance or solicit his or her advice. Why would she? The baby can’t even take a breath without umbilical help, much less navigate a path into new life. Nor, Jesus is saying, can we. Spiritual rebirthing requires a capable parent, not an able infant.

Who is this parent? Check the strategically selected word *again*. The Greek language offers two choices for *again*:²

1. *Palin*, which means a repetition of an act; to redo what was done earlier.³
2. *Anothen*, which also depicts a repeated action, but requires the original source to repeat it. It means “from above, from a higher place, things which come from heaven or God.”⁴ In other words, the one who did the work the first time does it again. This is the word Jesus chose.

The difference between the two terms is the difference between a painting by da Vinci and one by me. Suppose you and I are standing in the Louvre, admiring the famous *Mona Lisa*. Inspired by the work, I produce an easel and canvas and announce, “I’m going to paint this beautiful portrait again.”

And I do! Right there in the Salle des Etats, I brandish my palette and flurry my brush and re-create the *Mona Lisa*. Alas, Lucado is no Leonardo. Ms. Lisa has a Picassoesque imbalance to her—crooked nose and one eye higher than the other. Technically, however, I keep my pledge and paint the *Mona Lisa again*.

Jesus means something else. He employs the second Greek term, calling for the action of the original source. He uses the word *anothen*, which, if honored in the Paris gallery, would require da Vinci’s presence. *Anothen* excludes:

Latter-day replicas.

Second-generation attempts.

Well-meaning imitations.

He who did it first must do it again. The original creator recreates his creation. This is the act that Jesus describes.

Born: God exerts the effort.

Again: God restores the beauty.

We don't *try* again. We need, not the muscle of self, but a miracle of God.

The thought coldcocks Nicodemus. "How can this be?" (v. 9). Jesus answers by leading him to the Hope diamond of the Bible.

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.

A twenty-six-word parade of hope: beginning with God, ending with life, and urging us to do the same. Brief enough to write on a napkin or memorize in a moment, yet solid enough to weather two thousand years of storms and questions. If you know nothing of the Bible, start here. If you know everything in the Bible, return here. We all need the reminder. The heart of the human problem is the heart of the human. And God's treatment is prescribed in John 3:16.

He loves.

He gave.

We believe.

We live.

The words are to Scripture what the Mississippi River is to America—an entryway into the heartland. Believe or dismiss them, embrace or reject them, any serious consideration of Christ must include them. Would a British historian dismiss the Magna Carta? Egyptologists overlook the Rosetta stone? Could you ponder the words of Christ and never immerse yourself into John 3:16?

The verse is an alphabet of grace, a table of contents to the Christian hope, each word a safe-deposit box of jewels. Read it again, slowly and aloud, and note the word that snatches your attention. “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.”

“God so *loved* the world . . .” We’d expect an anger-fueled God. One who punishes the world, recycles the world, forsakes the world . . . but loves the world?

The *world*? This world? Heartbreakers, hope-snatchers, and dream-dousers prowl this orb. Dictators rage. Abusers inflict. Reverends think they deserve the title. But God loves. And he loves the world so much he gave his:

Declarations?

Rules?

Dicta?

Edicts?

No. The heart-stilling, mind-bending, deal-making-or-breaking claim of John 3:16 is this: *God gave his son . . . his only son*. No abstract ideas but a flesh-wrapped divinity. Scripture equates Jesus with God. God, then, gave himself. Why? So that “*whoever* believes in him shall not perish.”

John Newton, who set faith to music in “Amazing Grace,” loved this barrier-breaking pronoun. He said, “If I read ‘God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that when John Newton believed he should have everlasting life,’ I should say, perhaps, there is some other John Newton; but ‘whosoever’ means this John Newton and the other John Newton, and everybody else, whatever his name may be.”⁵

Whoever . . . a universal word.

And *perish* . . . a sobering word. We'd like to dilute, if not delete, the term. Not Jesus. He pounds Do Not Enter signs on every square inch of Satan's gate and tells those hell-bent on entering to do so over his dead body. Even so, some souls insist.

In the end, some perish and some live. And what determines the difference? Not works or talents, pedigrees or possessions. Nicodemus had these in hoards. The difference is determined by our belief. "Whoever *believes* in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Bible translators in the New Hebrides islands struggled to find an appropriate verb for *believe*. This was a serious problem, as the word and the concept are essential to Scripture.

One Bible translator, John G. Paton, accidentally came upon a solution while hunting with a tribesman. The two men bagged a large deer and carried it on a pole along a steep mountain path to Paton's home. When they reached the veranda, both men dropped the load and plopped into the porch chairs. As they did so, the native exclaimed in the language of his people, "My, it is good to stretch yourself out here and rest." Paton immediately reached for paper and pencil and recorded the phrase.

As a result, his final translation of John 3:16 could be worded: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever stretcheth himself out on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."⁶

Stretch out on Christ and rest.

Martin Luther did. When the great reformer was dying, severe headaches left him bedfast and pain struck. He was offered a medication to relieve the discomfort. He declined and explained, "My best prescription for head and heart is that *God so loved the*

*world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”*⁷

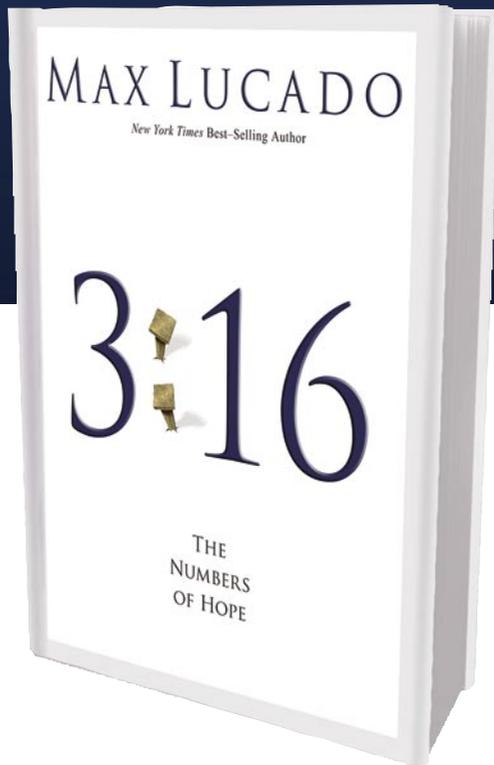
The best prescription for head and heart. Who couldn't benefit from a dose? As things turned out, Nicodemus took his share. When Jesus was crucified, the theologian showed up with Joseph of Arimathea. The two offered their respects and oversaw Jesus's burial. No small gesture, given the anti-Christ climate of the day. When word hit the streets that Jesus was out of the tomb and back on his feet, don't you know Nicodemus smiled and thought of his late-night chat?

Born again, eh? Who would've thought he'd start with himself.

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