

## **John and Jesus Tell Their Stories**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is the German theologian who was executed by the Nazis for participating with the German underground in an attempted assassination of Adolph Hitler. As a child, one of his favorite books was entitled *'Everyday Heroes.'* It was filled with stories of courageous young people who, with selflessness and clear thinking, often saved others' lives, sometimes at the cost of their own. Just before his execution, besides his Bible, Bonhoeffer was reading a book that told of the courageous character of ancient historical figures.

Prof. Daniel Taylor writes: "Ethics are more formed by the stories with which we surround ourselves, than [just] by the rules that are drilled into us. Tell us what stories you value, and we have a good start on knowing who you are and how you will act in the world." <sup>i</sup>

What are your favorite stories? Today, in John chapter 3, we hear John the Apostle tell two of his favorite stories. They are stories told by two of his favorite people – his two most powerful mentors: John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ. Today, I want us to study these stories in reverse order from how John presents them. So, first, let's study the story told by John the Baptist, which we might call...

### **I. The Story of the Man from Heaven.**

First, let's see the setting. John the Baptist, you'll remember, is Jesus' second cousin. His mother Elizabeth was Jesus' mother Mary's first cousin. Why is this important? Because this means that John has his mother and father as reliable sources of information concerning the supernatural birth of Jesus.

In this section of Scripture, John 3:27-36, John the Baptist is responding to a statement by his own disciples that Jesus was baptizing and lots of people were becoming His followers. We can presume from their statements that they were concerned about this, even jealous. To this, John responds with one of the best "Best Man" speeches of all time. Let's look at it.

First, John declares who he is. He's the friend of the Bridegroom. We'd call him the "Best Man." Who's the bride? The church is the bride. Listen to this part of John's "Best Man" speech as interpreted by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*:

*"You yourselves were there when I made it public that I was not the Messiah but simply the one sent ahead of him to get things ready. The one who gets the bride is, by definition, the bridegroom. And the bridegroom's friend, his 'best man' – that's me – in place at his side where he can hear every word, is genuinely happy. How could he be jealous when he knows that the wedding is finished and the marriage is off to a good start?" (John 3:28-29)*

So first, John establishes who he is. Then secondly, he describes who Jesus is. He says, (again from *The Message*):

*"The One who comes from above is head and shoulders over other messengers from God. The earthborn is earthbound and speaks earth language; the heavenborn is in a league of his own. He sets out the evidence of what he saw*

*and heard in heaven. No one wants to deal with these facts. But anyone who examines this evidence will come to stake his life on this: that God himself is the truth.” (John 3:31-33)*

Finally, John the Baptist describes what Jesus, the Man from Heaven, came to do. I’m reading now from the NIV because it is more grammatically accurate. It says:

**“For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.” (John 3:34-36)**

So, what kind of a story is John the Baptist telling us? He’s telling a love story. He says that Jesus is the Groom, people who love Jesus and believe in Him are the Bride and he, John, is the Best Man. And he says that, as the Best Man, he just wants to get these two to the altar. If that happens, he’s gonna be a happy man!

Have any of you ever tried to play matchmaker? Or how about this, have any of you had a mother who tried to play matchmaker for you? How’d that work out? There are classic stories from Broadway and Hollywood about ‘matchmaking gone wrong,’ aren’t there? Remember the matchmaker in *Fiddler on the Roof*? She tries to match Teyva’s daughter Tzeitel with Lazar Wolf, the butcher, a man the same age as her father. Remember how hilarious and sad that was?

Well, what John the Baptist is doing is pretty much the opposite of that. John’s disciples are coming to him and saying, “Rabbi, Rabbi, people are falling in love with Jesus just because you said He was the Lamb of God. You’ve got to stop them! You’ve got to break up this romance!”

John basically says, “Break it up? Are you crazy!! This is what I live for! These people have fallen in love with the Perfect Man from Heaven who came to rescue them. They now have a relationship that will give them ultimate joy and will never end. I couldn’t be happier.”

Do you understand that this is the style of matchmaking you’ve been called to? You can’t force people into a relationship with Jesus and you can’t talk them into it or bribe them into it or trick them into it. **You can do one thing: introduce them to Jesus.** That’s what the second ‘S’ in BLESS is all about. Tell them your story of how you got to know Jesus. Tell them what your life was like before you met Him and what it’s been like since. Then, back away and let Jesus do His thing. When they have questions, be ready to answer them or find answers for them. And then pray that soon your friend will be singing “Miracle of Miracles” and you’ll say along with John, *“That joy is mine and is now complete.”*

We all have the call of John the Baptist. We’re all the “Best Man,” the “Maid of Honor,” called to introduce our friends to Jesus and say, “Look! Whoever believes in Him has eternal life.” But we have a second story told here as well. It’s:

## **II. The Story of How to Move from Death to Life**

This story is told by Jesus. In the middle of this story is the classic verse, John 3:16, which tells us how much God loves the world. With that in mind, why would I say that this passage is about moving from death to life? I say that because **this passage makes it clear that the love of God does not save us.** (Do I have your

attention?) That's right, the love of God does not save you. But before I solve that mystery, let's go back to the beginning of Jesus' story...

Jesus was a gifted storyteller who told many different kinds of stories. In fact, it says in Mark 4:34 that He never taught without using a story. Some of those stories were parables, fiction that He used to make a point. But that's not what He's doing here in John 3. This is a true story.

A man named Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council, came to Jesus at night, presumably because it wasn't politically correct to do so during the day. He doesn't even ask a question when Jesus says to him:

**"... I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." (John 3:3)**

Now, you need to understand something about the Pharisees. They studied the Scriptures and they knew that the prophets promised that a Messiah, a Jewish ruler, was coming to save Israel. But the Pharisees were not careful in their study of the Scriptures to notice that this Messiah was promised to come twice. Once He would come as a Suffering Servant, something that Isaiah spoke of many times especially in Isaiah 53, and a second time as a judge. The Pharisees were only expecting a Messiah Judge to come and judge the Gentiles and free the Jews. So, when Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God, Nicodemus is perplexed. What is this qualification of being "born again" in order to see the Kingdom? Jesus continues:

**"You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." (John 3:7, 8)**

Nicodemus asks, "How can this be?" Jesus replies: (John 3:10, 12-13)

**You are Israel's teacher... and do you not understand these things? ...I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.**

So, Jesus is taking the title He uses most frequently for Himself, Son of Man, and welding it to the concept of Messiah, the Man from Heaven. Now, watch what He does next. He attaches the title Son of Man to another classic true story from Israel's past. Listen: (John 3:14-15)

**"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."**

In Numbers 21, the Israelites, on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land, began to blaspheme God and complain. God sent venomous snakes to punish them and the people asked Moses to pray for them. He did and God said, "Make a bronze snake, lift it up on a pole and tell the people that, if they look at it, they will live." (Num. 21:8) Jesus is now prophesying to Nicodemus that His crucifixion will be the spiritual re-enactment of that Old Testament true story.

Next, we come to what is easily the best-known verse in the whole Bible, John 3:16. Do you see the context? Jesus has been speaking of seeing the kingdom of God and being rescued from death. He then gives the reason why He's been talking this way: (John 3:16)

**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.**

Now, if you pick just this verse out of the conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus, you could draw the conclusion that Jesus is saying that we are one day going to be judged and if we don't straighten up and believe in Him now, that judgment will not go well. So, it is God's love that saves us because His love sent Jesus to save us BEFORE it's too late.

But that's not what Jesus is saying. He continues: (John 3:17-18)

**For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.**

Do you see our predicament? This world is not a testing ground where we all do our best and then AFTER WE DIE, our life score is tallied and we find out if we've going to heaven or hell. No, that scenario was created by Satan to deceive us into thinking that we just can't know where we're going. The truth is that if you don't believe that Jesus is God and you haven't asked Him to forgive your sin, you are "*condemned already.*" Those are His exact words! Non-believers in this world are living on death row. They've already been sentenced! They're not waiting for a trial where they can appear before the judge and explain themselves. No, the trial's over! They're just waiting for the sentence to be executed.

So, if this is you, if you think that you're an OK person and you might not be a saint but you certainly aren't a mass murderer or a pervert so you're just gonna keep on keepin' on and take your chances when you meet the Almighty, then you're in extreme danger because the truth is, you're a dead man walking. You don't need love because love can't reverse your sentence. You need one thing: you need a pardon. You need someone to reverse your sentence because your trial is already over and you lost big-time. John the Baptist said:

**"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."** (John 3:36)

The wrath of God isn't GOING TO COME upon him. It's already there! It "*remains upon him.*" And Jesus said:

**This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.** (John 3:19)

Friends, John 3:16 is not a happy, happy verse telling us that, because God loves us so much, He's gonna save every single 'whosoever.' No, it's a stern, stern warning announced by the Warden in the dungeon of death where we all live. He says, "You've all had your day in court and you've all received justice because you're all guilty. Now just accept your situation. You've no one to blame but yourselves."

The jailer turns to go, then he turns back around and says, "Oh, yes, I've also been directed by the King to read you these letters from former prisoners."

"Someone named Micah writes:"

**Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy.** (Micah 7:18)

"And from a former inmate named David:"

**When I kept silent, my bones wasted away  
through my groaning all day long.  
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.  
Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity.  
I said, "I will confess my transgression to the LORD" –  
and you forgave the guilt of my sin. (Ps. 32:3-5)**

"Finally, from a former inmate named Paul:" (I Timothy 1:12-13, 15-16)

**I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength...  
I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man,  
I was shown mercy...**

**Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance:  
Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the  
worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the  
worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an  
example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.**

As the Warden turns to go, you hear several prisoners call out, "Jesus, I believe that you are God and I'm a sinner. Please save me." And clunk! Their doors open and they walk out, free forever.

That's what John 3:16 is about. Does God love everyone in the world? Yes. But His love does not set them free. It's His grace and mercy, in the form of His Son dying your death and being raised again to life by His Father that sets you free. This grace and mercy is available to everyone. If you believe, you will receive eternal freedom. Does anyone here need to receive that freedom right now? Let's pray...

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<sup>i</sup> Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), pp. 18-19