**You are Called**

John 3:1-16

Today we start an eight-week series we’ve called MEET JESUS. It was inspired by the TV series The Chosen, and if you have seen the first season or are watching it now, you’ll notice that these eight weeks follow the key themes and storylines of season 1. Of course, you don’t have to watch the series since our goal here is not to interpret television together but rather ***to study and apply the BIBLE.***

But some of us have found The Chosen to be a useful tool for outreach. You may not be able to get a friend or family member to come to church with you - but you may get them to watch an episode or two of this really well written and produced TV series - the whole thing is available for free online or in their app. And that might give you an opportunity to talk about Jesus and point them to the Bible - where they can meet Jesus for themselves.

That is the incredible thing about this book - ***it really is a living document*** and God speaks to us and meets with us as we read it and study it and discuss it.

***Imagine that you were a Jew in ancient times*** - 2,000 or even 3,000 years ago - and you heard this verse read in your local synagogue:

“But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: ‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.’” Isaiah 43:1

Of course, **as a Jew, this was part of your central identity** - ***the chosen and blessed people of God***. You tracked your lineage closely because you are proud of your family line - your tribe and clan. Let’s say you were descended from Levi so you were not only a member of the nation of Israel and chosen in that sense, but you were also in the holy line of Levi, those set apart to serve in the temple area and to handle the most holy things of God. High priests could only be appointed from the line of Levi and even more specifically from the line of Aaron, the first high priest.

As a Jew, verses like this would have been ***very special to you, very comforting*** - especially in times of worry and fear. Just to know that God created you on purpose; He formed you uniquely and by design to be exactly who you are. The God of heaven and earth, the covenant God of Israel speaks to you personally and says, “Do not be afraid.” Then He gives the reason you should not fear - “I have redeemed you.”

In other words, God is saying, “I paid the price to set you free from slavery in Egypt and more than that to set you free from your sin and the judgment you deserve.” Then the Lord goes on to say, “I have called you by name; you are mine.” That is the heart of a Father for His beloved son or daughter. “I named you! You belong to me!” Not in a creepy Phantom of the Opera way but in an affectionate, intimate, protective way. You are with me and I am with you. Nothing will come between us. So do not be afraid.

Now, a man who would have known this verse - Isaiah 43:1 - who would have known it very well and would have meditated on its meaning and prayed over it and probably taught it numerous times in Synagoguge - was **Nicodemus**. He was a ruler of the Jews, it tells us in verse 1.

If there was anyone in Jesus’ day who ***felt called by God and chosen by the Creator***, it was Nicodemus. He was important and recognized. Jesus calls him “the Teacher of Israel” so he must have been prominent even among the Pharisees.

“Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night…” John 3:1

***Why the late night visit?*** Why not meet up during the day? What was Nicodemus worried about?

Well, ***he had a reputation to protect!*** He had questions for this new, young, controversial rabbi - and couldn’t be seen publicly considering the teachings of one outside the Pharisee group. It’s hard to judge the chronology of Jesus’ ministry in the gospel of John because he assumes you’ve already read Matthew, Mark and Luke - so even though this event happens early in John’s gospel it might be a year or more into Jesus’ ministry.

“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

In John 2 Jesus turned the water into wine but Nicodemus seems to be referring to multiple signs - other miracles, healings, public manifestations of considerable power. One of the clever guesses in Episodes 1 and 2 of ***the Chosen connects Nicodemus with Mary Magdalene***. Now, there’s no evidence in Scripture that Nicodemus had any involvement with Mary when she was possessed by demons, or that any Jewish leaders did. But it’s certainly possible. And since she was possessed by numerous demons it’s totally possible that her situation got escalated, and Nicodemus could well have been at the top of that management structure.

So it is within the realm of possibility that one of the signs Nicodemus is referring to here is the specific healing of Mary Magdalene after he himself was unable to do so. Again - that’s a guess and can’t be proven either way. The point for us is that Jesus was healing a lot of people and was driving out a lot of demons - it was becoming apparent that he was no ordinary Rabbi. He had power. He had authority. ***And Nicodemus knew that power and authority to heal and cast out demons could only come from God Himself.***

Verse 1 and 2 show us the first two signs that God is calling you. We will see four signs here in John 3 - and first we will rejoice to confirm that God has called us - and praise the Lord for that! But then we will apply these signs to the people around us to see if there might be evidence that God is calling out to them right now.

**Signs that God is Calling You:**

1. You’ve seen the **Power** of God

“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

Nicodemus saw the miracles Jesus was doing and heard the authority with which Jesus spoke - and knew that it was the POWER OF GOD at work in and through Him. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus was confident in his knowledge of the Bible - knowing verses like Isaiah 43 by heart and boldly teaching them to the Jewish people. But Nicodemus was along enough in ministry to know that the average person - Pharisee or not - could not just walk up to a crippled man and command him to walk. You couldn’t place your hands on a blind man and make him see. You couldn’t touch a leprous person and make her clean and well. You couldn’t take a violent, obviously demon possessed person and just command the demons to leave her.

Only God could do those things.

**Nicodemus was feeling the call of God** - and not in the ways he expected. He had already followed the call of God into the life of ministry that was being a Pharisee - the most rigorous sect within Judaism in those days. ***He was devoted.*** He spent the vast majority of his time studying Scripture, teaching on it, building his reputation and following in Israel. That’s what calling had meant to him so far in his life. He considered his life a calling.

But now he was feeling something else. This was personal. This was different. He was seeing the very finger of God working in ways that were impossible in his experience and in all the rabbinic traditions up to that time.

***I bet you’ve seen the power of God in your life.*** If you look back on how the Lord called you to Himself, I bet there were specific ways He showed up for you to make it clear that He was real and that He was active in your world. I lived a pretty tame suburban life so the main way I knew God was real was through the very tangible ***conviction of sin*** I felt as my childish sins got a little more real in the teen years.

But Kristin and her family had some very cool confirmations of God’s goodness and power. When Kristin was 15 her Dad took early retirement from the Army. We like to joke that she went from ***riches to rags twice in her life*** - first when Dad left the comfortable life of an Army officer and went to seminary and again later when she broke up with her high school boyfriend (who owned an airplane) and got together with me (who did not).

Imagine being 15, 16, 17 when your parents move to South Carolina and pretty much embrace a life of poverty just when you get to be in high school. But every step of the way the Lord provided for their needs. Mike and Kathi showed their kids what it meant to pray and trust the Lord. When they left Germany and moved back to the US they gave away a lot of their things, trusting God to provide what they would need - and He did. And after their savings ran out, again they prayed as a family and the Lord provided a preaching scholarship to help Mike finish seminary. Some of you have heard Mike preach and are not surprised at all to hear that.

What was it for you? How did God show up in your life? That’s the first sign that God is calling you - you see the power of God. Maybe it’s as simple as seeing the beauty of creation - the sun and stars and nature. Maybe it’s the birth of a child. Maybe it was a miraculous healing or some other specific answer to prayer. You see the power of God. Second:

**Signs that God is Calling You:**

1. You feel **Drawn** to Jesus

“Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night…” John 3:1-2

Seeing God work through Jesus got the attention of this ruler of the Jews. He was nervous about it, so met with Jesus secretly, at night. But still - he was drawn to this backwater Jewish rabbi. He had questions. He was, in a way, haunted by Jesus.

Now, some of you know that **I am more Calvinistic in my beliefs** - which just means I place a high emphasis on the sovereignty of God in the salvation of people. I once summed up Calvinism with the question, “If someone gets saved, who gets the credit?” To me, the only answer to that is GOD - since it’s clear that “no one can boast,” about receiving the grace of Jesus. Grace, by definition, is not something you earn and therefore is not something you can brag to your friends about. And if you try, it pretty much backfires because in saying how much grace you have received you are telling them what a wicked sinner you were.

I bring this up because of the doctrine of EFFECTUAL CALLING. It’s all over the New Testament but is especially clear in Romans 8.

**Signs that God is Calling You:**

1. You feel **Drawn** to Jesus

“And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” Romans 8:30

Now, those who place more emphasis on human responsibility and the need for people to make a decision for Jesus - those are called Arminians by the way - will point back to verse 29 that God’s predestination was based on his foreknowledge. It’s a fair point for the Arminians. But, to me, verse 30 is compelling anyway. This is a wonderfully comforting verse about the unstoppable grace of God.

And I find it wonderfully freeing and ***empowering when it comes to evangelism.*** It is not up to you and me to be so winsome and clear and compelling in our outreach that we “win souls for Jesus.” For sure, we try to be nice about it and we work on how we share our story and God’s story. Let’s not make it difficult for people. But what we are doing as we reach out to friends and neighbors is simple to JOIN GOD IN HIS WORK. We are simply following the signs and clues to the people God is already working on. The people He is CALLING.

***Because the call of God is EFFECTUAL.*** Once someone is caught in that tractor beam, they will be drawn in. Ok, that’s a negative image if you think of the Death Star but think of the Kingdom of Heaven having a tractor beam - which it does, and His name is the Holy Spirit.

Do you remember when you first felt that attraction to Jesus? For many of us, we were young - and learned about Jesus in Sunday School and Bible club and youth group. Some of you were late bloomers in the kingdom - you came later to the party. But still, you felt that drawing power of the Holy Spirit. Something got your attention and drew you to Jesus. You started to read the New Testament. You heard the good news that Jesus died for you - and you were moved by His love and grace.

As you reach out to the people around you - ***this is the key sign to be watching for***. If you are talking with a friend or neighbor and they just are not interested in spiritual things - if they aren’t open to talking about the Bible or about Jesus, it probably means that God is not actively calling them RIGHT NOW. He may later. They might be back at step one waiting for some crisis to show them that God is real and that they need Him. So keep praying and loving and serving them. It may be that YOU are the sign they need that God is real and that God loves them. And it may be that your relationship with Jesus will be a catalyst to start that process of drawing them to Jesus.

Nicodemus was drawn to Jesus - but the conversation he had with Jesus is so significant for us and for the average American. Because step 3 and 4 are essential for those who are called.

**Signs that God is Calling You:**

1. You know you need a **Change**

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

What Nicodemus needed was not more information. He didn’t need a 10 week Bible study on Deuteronomy or a new devotional book on the Psalms. ***What he needed was a total change.*** He needed to realize that the path he was on - as religious and disciplined as it was - was still a dead end. No matter how hard you try, you can’t make yourself worthy of God and heaven. Only Jesus can do that.

Now, understandably, Nicodemus got confused about this phrase Jesus used, ***“Born again.”*** Ok, Rabbi, how does that work - exactly? You can’t climb back into your mother’s womb - that would seem impractical for both parties. Right, good one Nic. So Jesus clarifies in verse 5.

1. You know you need a **Change**

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” John 3:5

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/born-water-spirit-mean/>

Now, some have taken this verse to prove the false doctrine of baptismal regeneration - that you actually get saved in the waters of baptism. But if Jesus meant for Nicodemus to understand that baptism was necessary to be saved he almost certainly would have made that more clear.

No, Jesus is drawing on the vast Old Testament knowledge Nicodemus had ready in his mind. What passage would a Bible scholar and Pharisee think of that connects WATER and the SPIRIT? The most likely answer is Ezekiel 36.

**“**I will sprinkle clean **water** on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and **a new spirit** I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put **my Spirit** within you…” Ezekiel 36:25-27

No doubt this passage in Ezekiel and the similar passage in Jeremiah 31 about the New Covenant would have been considered “tricky” in the days of Nicodemus - much debated in terms of their meaning.

***Enter Jesus to give the meaning*** and show how that meaning can only be truly found in HIM - the Messiah who will accomplish the cleansing and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

What is striking - from Ezekiel 600 years before Jesus - is that the cleansing the prophet promised was **INTERNAL**. Cleansing with water would have normally been EXTERNAL - ceremonial handwashing and that kind of thing. But then Ezekiel starts talking about a new HEART and a new SPIRIT - totally internal, spiritual realities. And, of course, that’s what people need if they are going to be cleansed of things like IDOLS.

Then, in the most shocking and hard to understand verse of all, God promises to give all of His people His Holy Spirit. The anointing and filling of the Holy Spirit in the OT was reserved for special people at special times - prophets, priests and kings. Not the everyday Jew.

But this message from Ezekiel explicitly says it is to “the house of Israel” (v. 22). And it’s a passage about CALLING.

“Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came… I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land.” Ezekiel 36:22, 24

In other words, God promised to act based entirely on HIS OWN character and His own Word - for the sake of His own name and reputation - and the result of that promise would be ***an in-gathering of His people FROM THE NATIONS!*** He would bring all of His people together, calling them all in - and then changing them from the inside out.

1. You know you need a **Change**

**“**I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean… And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you.” Ezekiel 36:25-26

This is what Jesus meant by being born “of water and of the Spirit.” He meant that what we all need is a total change - an internal transformation of the heart. We need the cleansing water of God’s grace and the new desires that come from God’s Spirit.

When God is calling a person ***they feel this need to change deep down***. They become uncomfortable with their selfish, sinful choices. Maybe they have experienced the consequences of those sins in broken relationships and lost opportunities. Maybe they have succeeded at everything but still feel empty - realizing, as King Solomon did, that it’s all vanity - chasing after the wind. Money and sex and power can never really satisfy. There must be something more.

That’s the third sign that God is calling someone - they know they need a change - but they don’t yet know what that change entails. That’s why they need YOU and me. They need clear direction like Jesus gave Nicodemus in this conversation. Which brings us to the fourth sign that God is calling someone.

**Signs that God is Calling You:**

1. You realize **Jesus is the One** who can change you

“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.” John 3:14-15

Here again Jesus points to an Old Testament passage Nicodemus would have been very familiar with. No doubt every Jewish child was raised hearing this story about snakes and judgment. Vindictive Dads and twisted Grampas would have told this story by the campfire late at night. Moms and Grammas would have told the story more gently to teach their little ones not to complain and to be patient.

The story appears in Numbers 21 as the people are in their wilderness wandering stage. They have to go around Edom, which is inconvenient, and the people start to fuss and complain because - again - there is no food or water - nothing but MANNA.

And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” Numbers 21:5

Now, this wasn’t the first time they complained - it was probably the 50th or 100th time. But notice, they didn’t just complain that they were running low on food and water. They spoke out, as a group, against GOD and against Moses, God’s appointed leader for them. They accused God of being cruel and not providing for them. They implied that they would be better off in Egypt with THOSE GODS taking care of them.

Err - foul. Throw the flag. Blow the whistle. You’re out of bounds. You crossed the line.

Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.” Numbers 21:6-7

Notice the progression here. The Israelites ***saw the power of God.*** They didn’t believe it was a “coincidence” or the act of some foreign deity. They knew those snakes were a direct judgment of God on them.

Second, they knew they needed a change. The snakes were killing LOTS OF THEM. This was a plague like God sent against Egypt, but now it was directed against THEM - and there was no pest service crew to call to deal with these poisonous vipers.

***So they went to MOSES*** - who was the appointed prophet and leader for them - their Messiah if you will, their anointed leader. They realized he was the one who could pray for them, who could intercede for them and save them from God’s wrath. And notice how Moses saved them.

So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.” Numbers 21:7-9

Now, if we didn’t have John 3:15 and the clear JESUS fulfillment of this passage we might wonder why God chose this particular way to save people from the snakes. But the purpose of the Old Testament is to point ahead to the coming Messiah - and this is one of the clearest examples of that.

Those Old Testament Jews were ***saved from the snake bites BY FAITH ALONE***. They didn’t have to offer a sacrifice. They didn’t have to say a long, drawn out prayer. They didn’t have to go to the temple or have a priest pray for them. All they had to do was LOOK. Just the act of looking on the bronze serpent - elevated there in the middle of camp - that was enough. No doubt there were times people were dying and friends had to carry them within view of the serpent - like the friends who carried the paralyzed man to Jesus.

So we come back to John 3.

1. You realize **Jesus is the One** who can change you

“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.” John 3:14-15

This is our job as we reach out to people - to lift up JESUS before them - to bring them within view of the one they can look upon, the one they can call upon, and be saved.

Because ***people have been bitten by the poisonous, lethal serpent called SIN***. And it is killing them. They feel the effects in their hearts and in their bodies - and they are trying everything they can to feel better. But there is only ONE treatment, only ONE Healer who can change them. And His name is Jesus.

Jesus had to be lifted up - not on a bronze pole, but on a rough Roman cross. He had to be lifted up in history so we could look back through time and put our faith in Him. And this brings us to that most famous of Bible verse - John 3:16.

1. You realize **Jesus is the One** who can change you

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16

Just look on Jesus. Just lift your eyes to see Him there on the cross. That single glance of FAITH will save you. It will change you. Now, we know from Romans 10:9-10 that the look of faith must be accompanied by words.

1. You realize **Jesus is the One** who can change you

“If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved.” Romans 10:9

Two things - only two - are necessary to be saved. First, you must say out loud that Jesus is Lord - confess it before people. Second, you must believe the words you say. It’s not enough to say it, you have to believe it. But it’s not enough to just believe it, you have to say it out loud.

1. You realize **Jesus is the One** who can change you

“For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” Romans 10:10

There’s that word “Heart” again. It’s the central part of you and the eyes reveal the heart. If your eyes are scanning the world, looking everywhere but to Jesus, you will never find the answers you long for. It is only when your eyes come to rest on Jesus - there on the cross - that you will find the hope and the love and the peace and the joy you’ve been looking for.

So here is our summary:

**Signs that God is Calling You:**

1. You’ve seen the **Power** of God
2. You feel **Drawn** to Jesus
3. You know you need a **Change**
4. You realize **Jesus is the One** who can change you

Look back on your life and you will see these mile markers in your journey to Jesus. When He called your name you started to see God’s hand at work all around you. You felt drawn to this Jesus in the Bible. And you became increasingly uncomfortable with the life you were living. Things that used to make you happy just didn’t satisfy anymore. You knew there was something missing - something more.

And then you realized, the missing piece was the main one - the one that fits right in the middle and changes everything. It was Jesus. The Holy Spirit lifted Jesus up before you. Maybe it was a friend telling you about Him. Maybe it was the Bible itself or a gospel tract. For some people it might be the TV show the Chosen, like the Jesus Film before that and countless other movies and shows and concerts - whose goal is to lift up the Name of Jesus - the only name under heaven by which we can be saved.

Do you see these signs in someone in your life right now? Maybe there is someone like Nicodemus who is asking spiritual questions - but doing it on the sly - coming at night, as it were. Over the coming weeks we will zoom in on some different people. If you watch the Chosen episodes before each Sunday you’ll be familiar with the person we focus on.

One of the advantages of pointing someone to a show like The Chosen is that it calls the question. It’s not asking that much of someone to watch an episode of a TV show. To watch it with you - that might feel like a bigger ask, because they have to deal with you. But just getting on a laptop or a phone and taking 45 minutes to an hour to watch a well produced show… If someone is open to that, the Lord might well be calling them.

What we’ll see over the coming weeks is that there are:

**Four Kinds of People:**

* Nicodemus - self-righteous
* Mary Magdalene - self-loathing
* Matthew - self-focused
* Simon - self-reliant

A lot of people around us are like Nicodemus - they are “good people,” maybe even religious church-goers. But they don’t see the problem is in their hearts - that they are self-righteous, not trusting fully in Jesus to save them.

Other people are the opposite, like Mary Magdalene we will look at next week. They aren’t proud and self-righteous, they are broken and desperate and probably hate themselves.

Others are like Matthew - focused on their own needs and desires, even if it means betraying their childhood faith and committing to the world.

Finally, some are like Simon, who became Peter. They are just busy. They are working hard to make ends meet. Do they make some compromises here and there? Sure! Don’t we all! But in the end, they aren’t trusting fully in God, they are relying on themselves and their own efforts.

Maybe your friend is a mixture of all of these. Let’s keep praying for the people in our lives and keep lifting up the name of Jesus for them so they can look upon Him and be changed forever.

Let’s pray.