

Season 4, Episode 6: Glorious Love (3:1-21) with Karen Soole

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Sarah: Welcome to two sisters in a cup of tea. My name is Sarah and I live in the UK. This is my sister Felicity and she lives in the US. And today we're delighted that Karen Soole is joining us for this next part in John's Gospel. Karen, why don't you tell us a bit about yourself and what you get up to on a normal week?

Karen: Well, I am definitely in the UK, in the north of England, which is a beautiful part of England to live in, and I'm part of a church called Trinity Church, Lancaster, and I'm responsible for the women's ministry there and small group Bible studies in church. And so I spend my week reading the Bible with people, meeting up, usually with women reading the Bible onetoone. But I'm involved in teaching the Bible in other settings as well. So with women across the north of England and different things, because I'm involved with something called Northern Women's Convention and stuff. So my weeks are varied depending on what's going on. But it's about opening up the Bible with women.

Sarah: What a joy. Amazing.

Felicity: It's so great to have you with us, Karen. I have definitely been a beneficiary of Karen's Bible teaching, especially when I lived in the north of England, and really appreciate all that you're doing on that front. I mean, on a slightly different note, what would be your choice of tea and biscuits?

Karen: Well, my choice of tea is Darjeeling. I don't know if you into DA shealing. It's a much lighter sort of yeah, I get told it's a little bit wimpy up here. It's not possible.

Felicity: Would it equate to L gray? Or is it more like it doesn't.

Karen: Have quite the sort of floor or aroma of El gray or very weak. But to go with it and I have loved this biscuit for years and it's a real staple and it's a very simple biscuit, but it's a ginger, not biscuit.

Felicity: Very classic. Classic, yeah. It has to have its own tin, though, so a little logistical in there.

Karen: The demand, the ginger effects, everything else.

Sarah: It's a bit like celery in that.

Felicity: Never thought about celery in that light, but now you mention it.

Sarah: Taste a celery. Anyway.

Felicity: What you did mention when you were telling us about your normal wheat, Karen, was the fact that you have actually written a couple of books as well. So we unleash the word is one that I have found invaluable it's all about how you teach the Bible and how you write Bible studies and a really good way of thinking through how to do that. And I've been giving it to everyone in an attempt to help people think through that in that way. And then the one I've read most recently, which is I know, is you've published relatively recently, called liberated. And I've really appreciated the way that you have taken the topic of women in the Bible. And we might think the Bible is not very kind to women or God doesn't think highly woman. And you've really, as you've written the book, you've taken us through various different passages in the Bible and helped us to see how women are actually exalted rather than not. And what I love about it is your really solid biblical handling of it that is then persuasive. And I thought actually it's a book that I would be happy to give to an unbelieving friend as well, who might be asking that same question. I think it's primarily for Christians. Is it? You wrote it. Why did you write it?

Karen: Yeah, well, I'm glad you would like to give it to an unbelieving friend because actually, that was the person that I had in my heart as I read it, as I wrote it. And it's based really on from some of those once one Bible studies I'm talking about that I've done. Lancaster is a small city in the UK, but it has a university. And I've met up with girls who are in students and who would say that they're very passionately feminist and have huge

concerns about the fact that the Bible maybe were sexist. And real concerns about the God is not. Good for women and that the gospel isn't good news, and knowing that the gospel is the best news and that God does dignify and exalt women through the story of the Bible, I wanted to help them see the truth of that. And the best way of doing that is actually particularly going to some of the stuff in the Old Testament that people, when they first open and go, OOH, I'm not sure what to do with that, and actually work with some of those difficult passages. And it's based on times in coffee shops with young women bashing around some of those ideas and helping them see those truths and then thought it would be good to put this in a book and run through the whole Bible story, really from Genesis right through to Revelation and show that how the gospel is really good news for women. So, yes, I think Christian women will find it helpful because I think all of us sometimes as women can come across those passages, even when we know the gospel is good news, that read something, think, oh, I like how this works, and have some questions. So certainly it's useful for that. But yeah, definitely. If you have a friend who is sort of interested but just suspicious, I would love you open up that book and maybe read a chapter a week and have coffee with them. And there are questions or discussion as well to have at the end of each chapter. So, yeah, that's my ideal.

Sarah: All right, well, should we get stuck into today's passage? So today we're going to be looking at chapter three versus one to 21. And just as we've got Karen on for our episodes, this time it's going to be around half an hour rather than our usual 20 minutes. So let me read for us chapter three. Now, there was a pharisee, a man named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Jewish Ruling Council. He came to Jesus at night and said, rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform the signs you were doing if God were not with him. Jesus replied very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. How can someone be born when they're old? Nicodemus asked. Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born. Jesus answered very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God but unless they are born of water and the spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying you must be born again. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear it sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone border the spirit. How can this be? Nicodeen's asked. You are Israel's teacher, said Jesus, and do you not understand these things very truly? I tell you, we speak of what we know and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to your thirsty 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. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of man must be lifted up. That everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. 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. 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 they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict. Light has come into the world, but people love darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light so that it may be seen claiming that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

Felicity: Thank you, Sarah. Jam packed passage just got so much.

Sarah: So much.

Felicity: As I've been dwelling on it this week, I felt like some of it, I think, yes, I can see what is being said. And then other bits, I think, I'm not entirely sure. And then you put it all together and you think, I'm not sure why it's all in the same bit in John's gospel, but I think what we should do is kind of walk through it, see where we get to and hopefully get some clarity on what is being said here. Karen, how do we actually understand what Jesus is talking about? So we've got this. Nicodemus the pharisee. I love that he's a member of the Jewish Ruling Council. He's supposed to know stuff and yet he's coming and he's just

asking good questions, isn't he? I love this, just how an inquirer is very much sort of front and center here. The idea that we would want to be asking questions.

Sarah: To unpack this. I guess that's the question, isn't it?

Felicity: Yeah.

Karen: I mean, there is so much here and it's easy to be overwhelmed by it, isn't it? And I think the first thing I would do is just work out what the story is, because it is in a story, it's not being given as a whole load of truth sort of clumped together, although it feels like it's so much truth in here, there's so many profound ideas, and yet it's in a story. And I think that story can help us a lot. And even the end of chapter two, it's really interesting how right at the end of chapter two, you've seen Jesus in Jerusalem. Many people have seen the signs that Jesus was doing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust Himself to them, for he knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person. And now there's a pharisee named Nicodemus. So it's almost like set up this sort of here comes Nicodemus. He knows that Jesus is doing some great things too, but he hasn't got it all sorted out. And then you've already established the fact that maybe there's something about belief that's really important here. And you see that word that runs right the way through to the end of the little section, really, that you have this great statement, don't you? Everyone who believes may have eternal life. And it really matters whether you believe and how you respond to Jesus. So there's a big thread about that that runs through, I think. And I think so following the clues of what's repeated really helps that belief idea becomes really is really important. And then the other thing I think that really helps us is just the question and answer, the sort of the two and fourth and trying to just look at the conversation as a conversation. And so something can really stand out. And I think one of the things that really stands out in terms of story is Jesus saying to Nicodemus, I'm running ahead here, but is you are Israel's teacher and you don't understand these things. That's a rehuman thing to say, isn't it?

Sarah: Yeah.

Karen: Actually, that gives us something of when Nicodemus, as you said, Felicity, he was a member of the ruling council, he knew loads and yet he knew nothing. And Jesus is saying, you don't get this. So whatever's going on, Jesus is saying something to Nicodemus that is incredibly important, that even Nicodemus doesn't get. And so I think, actually, one of the questions that you can then go on to ask once you've got that is, what is it he doesn't get? Because I don't think I get it either.

Felicity: Yeah, that question of, like, what is it that he doesn't get? And the fact that Nicodemus doesn't get it, and I love that it's included here the kind of, what what is going on? It gives us license to kind of be listening in, doesn't it? And to be thinking, what is it that Jesus is teaching?

Sarah: I think just really striking that it's happening at night, it's happening in the shadows, isn't it? It's not out in the open. I think for me, it's been really striking to just remember, inquiries will come in all different shapes and sizes in terms of how people start to investigate themselves, who Jesus is and why he's important. And I think that's just been helpful. Just a reminder. Yeah. There's a process for everyone, isn't there? Nicodemus is on that journey, isn't he? And we get this snapshot into this conversation. What a privilege that we get to convey to hear what's going on here.

Felicity: Yeah, absolutely. So let's just jump into what Jesus actually says to start with. So, verse three. There we go. So Jesus replied, very true. I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. I mean, he drops a bombshell early on, doesn't he? Like, he's got a very confusing concept of being born again. I love the way Nicodemus deals with this. What do you mean? You can't be born and then go back to the womb? Like that doesn't work.

Karen: It's a really shocking statement, I think, for Nicodemus, because Jesus the bornagain thing is weird. But also, the whole idea is no one, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they're born again. Now, Nicodemus is one of these almost exemplary figures. He'd expect to be in on the kingdom of God.

Sarah: Yeah.

Karen: He would expect, in fact, all of the Jewish people would have thought, well, we're in, we're sorted, and here you've got this, quite a strong technique, something's got to happen. No one can see the Kingdom of God unless they're born again. So it's a really shocking turn of events, which I think Nicodemus just can't get his head round. I think he's genuine. I don't know if he's being sarcastic in his reply. Just don't think he can get his head round. What an earth Jesus can be talking about.

Felicity: Yeah, that's really help, because then Jesus does go on to say again, doesn't he, and vice versa. No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they're born of water and spit. So that kind of no one. There is something that needs to change in order for the kingdom of God to be accessible and visible, which is, as you say, very different to what would have been understood before, but also.

Sarah: Just the concept of being born again. That's nothing to do with you, is it? There's no work you can do for that to happen, like that happens to you. Being born happened to you.

Felicity: Bring about your own birth.

Sarah: And as we've go on in the passage, we see ever more clearly. That is what he's getting at, isn't it? Is that right, Karen, in terms of the kind of the thread of the passage, that you can't do it yourself?

Karen: Yeah, no, it's very clear, isn't it? Unless they're born with water and the Spirit, and he is saying it's something that happens and something you can't see. I think that's what that weird thing is about the wind. It's not something you see and it's not something you can control. We don't control the wind, but we do see the impact of it. And this is something that somebody who was born of the water and the Spirit, that does have an effect, it changes life. So there is an impact. But, yeah, I think Jesus is really saying it's something God has to do. And I think there must be a clue when he says that you should have understood these things, that he's referencing something that Nicodemus would have known and is not an unusual concept for him. And so this water and spirit idea is there in the Old Testament, but he just hasn't seen it before.

Sarah: Yes, very helpful.

Felicity: Very helpful. Very helpful. And as we're reading this and we're not Nicodemus, and we probably have less understanding of the Old Testament things than Nicodemus, what do we do with that? And Sarah and I have talked about this a bit on the previous episode as to what you do with the Old Testament kind of thing. Like, to what extent should we then be going back to the Old Testament in order to understand fully what is being said here?

Karen: I think if you can go back and there's a lovely passage to go back to, so it's Ezekiel, Chapter 36, is a brilliant passage to go back to. It talks about being given a new heart, and that passage, I think, is what is in view here, primarily, although there are allusions to this elsewhere. If you kind of know that, that's great, but you probably only know that because another Bible teacher or someone has told you that, yeah, let's see if this illustration works. And if it doesn't work, that's fine. I think when we're reading the Bible, it's a bit like where I live in the north thing, and we're not far from an area called the Lake District. And you go up and there's these beautiful lakes, and you can have a relationship with the lake. So you can stand on the side of the lake and you can pick up stones. If you've got small children, you might skim stones across the water and the stone will sort of hit the water surface and you'll be having some sort of contact with the lake. And I think sometimes when we're reading the Bible, that's kind of what we're doing. We're reading it, we're getting some contact, but we know there's more there. But that's all we can get at the moment. That's fine. We're getting that contact and God can use that in our lives. That's good. It's on a really hot day in the lakes. It's not often that hot, but there are times when it's really hot. Exciting temperatures up here, like 20 degrees Celsius. You might want to paddle in it and you might get a bit deeper. And then other times, on a really, really hot day, you might want to swim in it. And I think if you really want to swim in it, you are going to need to get help from other Bible teachers and get yourself a commentary and actually follow it through. And if anyone wants to do that, they should get Don Carson's book, his commentary on John's Gospel, which is brilliant, but not to be overwhelmed. Think I always have to go swimming in it, because I think the thing is, I need to go to the lake and I need to have a look and see what I can see and know that I won't be able to go. There's always more to discover.

Felicity: Yeah.

Sarah: That's so helpful, Karen. Thank you. It is really helpful. Illustration. I'm aware that time is pushing on, so in this passage we have, like, the most famous myth in the Bible. I think it's one of the ones that most people will know or become very familiar with saying after becoming a Christian, why is it here? Why is it surrounded by really complicated verses? Can you kind of help us navigate how we kind of put it in context?

Karen: Yeah. Well, let me give you a quick stab at trying to answer that. I think what Jesus says to Nicodemus is that you need a change which God's spirit will do. You need to be born again. He also actually a little bit that we have missed out. He also says something else. He says in verse 14, just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. There's a sentence. Wow. And again, that's another Old Testament story which is found in numbers. Is it number 14? I think I'm trying to remember exactly where it is, but the phrase lifted up. I think even when we see that, we can see that Jesus is saying something about Him being lifted up, which makes us think of the cross. And so in order to enter the kingdom of Heaven, you need to be born again and you need to look to the cross. There is definitely that's in the conversation. Nicodemus would not have got any of that. And I think the conversation now, it's very difficult in how it's written in our Bibles, but if you've got an NIV in front of you like I have, they have tried to separate out verse 15 from 16. And I think what then happens with verse 16 is John, who's writing the Gospel, is taking a stop, okay? And it's not Jesus talking anymore. In verse 16, this is John who's writing his Gospel so that people can see Jesus and have life. And he's now saying, right, okay. Now let me just reinforce all of what Jesus has just said. This is what's going on. God loved the world so much that he gave his son giving his son John's, thinking about the cross here, that whoever believes in Him won't perish, but will have eternal life. Believing in Jesus and what he's come to do is absolutely central to everything. I think John is actually making his little meditation here on the conversation that Jesus has had with Nicodemus.

Felicity: That's so helpful just to have that split and to see the kind of and then what John is saying is then echoes exactly what Jesus just said and as you say, just pushes it on and helps us to look at the cross for sure.

Sarah: Yeah, I think what struck me as well, just as dwell on that 316 again over this past week, is just as we've read it in the context of the whole at the beginning of John's Gospel, this is the first time we've heard the declaration of God's love. Like, we've seen Christ's compassion and his kind of drawing of people to Himself, but this is like the first declaration we've had of his in love that he's going to give himself. And I think it's really powerful when you see it in the context of this passage, but the whole of the beginning of the Gospel as well, isn't it?

Karen: Yeah, I mean, it's huge. It is huge. And it's one of those verses that, again, just it's simple, isn't it? God loves us. And yet it's incredibly profound, especially in John's gospel, when you have the world and we know how the world treats Christ. And you had that even in the prologue, the world doesn't recognize Christ. And you know that the world rejects Christ, and that God still loves the world and sends his son deliberately so that we can have eternal life. He's going to be lifted up on that cross so we can have eternal life, so we can be born again.

Felicity: When you put that in the context of what we were saying in relation to the previous bits that no one can enter, no one can see. And then we have the the means. Like the only means, I think, as I've been running on it this week, that kind of the just utter dependency on God giving his son so that we might believe and have eternal life and how easily other things can just begin to almost masquerade as possible ways of seeing the kingdom as possible ways of having life. But actually here, very clearly, through the gift of Jesus, that is it and what that means. Yes.

Sarah: And I think it really I don't know, does it reinforce where you get to the end of the passage and you kind of verse 20 and 21, I've really struggled to understand these verses, to be honest, pretty coupled with them. But is there whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so it may be seen plainly that what they've done has been done in the fight of God. Is there a sense of that we don't need to fear because we're trusting and we're gazing at Christ.

Felicity: Because we've.

Sarah: Got this nodd at the end of chapter two, isn't it? Christ knows what's in our hearts. It's pinnacled Christ at the center of this passage, saying to Him, that's how absolutely.

Karen: And it is interesting if you go back and look at the numbers story, they're bitten by snakes. They have to look at this snake on the bronze snake that Moses is holding up, but they're sorry, they're repentant and they look to the means of salvation. And I think coming into light is about being repentant and looking to your means of salvation. So actually you come into the light, your deeds are exposed, aren't they? But you're dependent on the cross. But if you remain in the darkness and you're hiding, then there is no chance of rescue. And that's a theme that sort of runs through John's gospel, I think, hiding in the darkness. Nicodemus has come in the dark, doesn't he? Are you going to come into the light and look for your rescue from Jesus? That's a challenge. You're going to believe in Him for life because that's what John is so concerned that we do.

Felicity: And isn't that so much easier when you've seen so clearly that Jesus is the means, the way, even the fulfillment of the Old Testament, the numbers thing like that, Jesus himself, God has given us all we need so we can run into the light. I know. And the more we feel our sin, the more of a relief that is, isn't it? As we kind of like the relief of just, you know what? I can I can still approach, but I can come into the the light.

Karen: Good news is the other bit, isn't it, that he came into the world not yet at this point to condemn the world, but to save the world. Jesus one day will return to judge the world. But he didn't come to judge the world. That rescue was what he came to do, and that's what he wants to do now. John's written his gospel, isn't it? Because he knows that life is available now, so he can come into the light now that rescue is available. That's what God wants to do. He wants to rescue the world. That is great. So if we're feeling overwhelmed, God's heart is to save. That's what Jesus wants to do. That's what his love is.

Sarah: It's so useful, isn't it? It's so good. And we don't need to hear that. It's not just for someone who's just considering the Christian faith. At this point, I think it's tempting to think, oh, this is just the truth about how salvation happens. But this is what I need my heart today. I need to remember that this is gloriously good news. It's glorious power that Christ has to bring new life. And that as I walk into that light and see it all more clearly, I need to hear it again and again and again on my heart. And it's just good. It's good, isn't it?

Felicity: It's one of those, like, that you read it first time and you're like, oh, yeah, yeah, I know that. And then you really think about it and it is, as you say, Sarah, Daily, to come to this truth is a game changer and a heart changer. Well, I feel like we could talk about this passage for the next I know. Why don't I pray? Or maybe, Karen, you should pray, actually.

Karen: I'd love to. Heavenly Father, we want to thank you for your love. Thank you that you did send Your Son into this world to save the world we know at what cost, as Your Son lifted up on that cross. And yes, we look to Him, you rescue us. Thank you that you have done that work. And thank you that you long to continue to do that work that others can be rescued to. Father, we pray that these truths will deeply affect our hearts. We may understand these things that are so important and it will help us to rejoice in you and what you've done for us, but also help us to continue to reach out with this message of hope and rescue in your Son to others who don't have that hope. And we are set. In Jesus name. Amen.

Felicity: Amen.

Sarah: So helpful as well.

Karen: Yeah.

Sarah: We massively appreciate you coming to join us.

Karen: I've been loving listening into your two sisters chat over the Bible.

Felicity: Good. Sarah, what else do we need to know?

Sarah: If everyone listening? We'll have some questions on our show notes, as usual, just to dig in a bit further and drive us to your heart a bit more. If you'd like to do that with a friend of a cup of tea or even just by yourself, Karen's book, you can. Find that at ten of those and we'll link that in the show notes as well. And I think that's about it. I think we're out of prime, so we look forward to get stuck into the next Octopus Gospel next week. See you then.

Karen: Bye. Bye.

Sarah: Bye.

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Karen: Close Video.