

10/22/17, Encountering Jesus- Nicodemus: John 3:1-15

April 2000, Senior in high school, I was having the worst week of my life. I had no idea what I was supposed to do with my life anymore, I was living with my older brother and grandfather, my parents had moved a couple hours away, everything felt up in the air, but that's not why I was having the worst week. I was having the worst week because I was being challenged by a mentor to read the book of Romans and after the first four chapters I was so depressed. I was feeling the weight of my sin and dysfunction. I felt like God could never love or accept me after I had abandoned him, been a hypocrite, broke his commandments, blasphemed him, mocked Christians...And the worst part? I knew better. I went to church my whole life, had great parents. But several years earlier abandoned my childhood faith and no longer believed in the God of the Bible. But something was drawing me back to look for answers.

But one night I was reading Romans 5:6-9

That night was the first of many spiritual encounters with Jesus through the Word of God and my world got turned upside down. Slowly but surely, God began to transform me from the inside out... What about you? Have you encountered Jesus? It looks different for everyone, but that's what we are about here. We want to introduce you to Jesus and help you follow him for the rest of your life. Because he came to GIVE you real life! So whether this is all new to you and you are a little freaked out right now... or you have been coming to church your whole life, our hope is that each Sunday you would encounter Jesus fresh again and find life in him. And we are doing that through the Gospel of John. Because John his eyewitness account of Jesus for that very purpose.

John 20:31

But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Today we are going to be introduced to a man who was the opposite of me, this is a guy who seemingly had life altogether! But after encountering Jesus one evening this man had his life turned upside down too.

John 3:1-2

¹Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ²He 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 are doing if God were not with him."

I think it's important to take notice the reason why it was undeniable that Jesus was from God. Because of the hard, factual evidence all around him, miracles. *No one can perform the miracles unless God was with him.* We sometimes think that Jesus performed a handful of miracles to a select group of people, which couldn't be

further from the truth. The gospels only record 31 days out of the public ministry of 3 years of Jesus' life. That is roughly 2%.

John 21:35

Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.

Jesus saturated the land of Israel with miracles.

Mark 3:8

When they heard about all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon. Let me show you a map. **[MAP]**

By the end of the 3 years, there wasn't a man, woman or child, religious elite or common sinner who hadn't either heard about his miracles from a reliable source or witnessed it with their own eyes.

Who is Nicodemus?

A **Pharisee**- now we are trained this side of history to think of Pharisees as hypocritical, egotistical, Jesus killers... but that was certainly NOT their reputation around Israel during the time of Jesus. They held the highest honor and respect among the Jewish community in this day. They were part of the strictest order of religious Jews, diligent to obey the law, they were well-trained theologians and trained in Hebrew, Greek and Amariac languages. We also find out that he was part of the Jewish ruling council, called the **Sanhedrin**. This was the supreme religious authority of the day, supreme court of the day, 71 members appointed to life. Highest honor that any Jewish person could be awarded. In addition to that we know Nicodemus was old, which was honored in that day, he had seniority among the elites. Moreover Jesus called him "**Israel's Teacher**." And so he was a Pharisee, member of the Sanhedrin, old, with the distinguished honor of being Israel's teacher. He is **YODA!**

So the elite of the elite religious authority comes to Jesus at night for a conversation. Why at night? Doesn't tell us, but it would seem to me that he didn't want to be seen. When I used to complain about my 11pm curfew as a teenager my mom used to say, "Only sneaky things happen at night." I think this is a sneaky thing. And I think that sneaky thing is that Nicodemus was sent to broker a deal. I think this was backroom politics...He says, "We know that you are from God." Who is the we? Likely the religious leadership. I think Nicodemus was sent to say, "Jesus I think we can help you and you can help us." Just my theory. Either way, this elite religious insider acknowledges at least that he is a good teacher and God is with him. Seems like good news for Jesus, "I've got the most influential religious leader on my side!" Let's see how he responds.

John 3:3

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

Not the response Nicodemus expected. Jesus doesn't care about the in crowd, political influence, not of it. He cares about people's relationship with God. Love that Jesus cuts through all the B.S. Kind of a Philly guy. If anything Nicodemus would have expected him to say that you can't see the kingdom of God unless you are Jewish. Taught at that time was that the "Kingdom of God" was the future point in time when God would restore an eternal kingdom and all Jews would be admitted except for traders and really, really bad ones. But born again? That was a complete shock to Nicodemus.

John 3:4-8

*⁴ "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of **WATER AND the SPIRIT.***

⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ 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."

Born of water and the Spirit- Lots of interpretations of what Jesus meant by "water and the spirit." A minority opinion believe that Jesus was referring to **Christian baptism**. But this practice was not even established until the birth of the church and Jesus tells Nicodemus that he should know what he is talking about, so that doesn't fit. Others believe Jesus is speaking of **2 births**, the first a physical birth (water= amniotic fluid), the second referring to spiritual conversion. Possible although unlikely because there is no reference to the term water being used to describe physical birth. I think born "of water and the Spirit" is speaking about **one spiritual experience** that Nicodemus should have known about because it was prophesied that this would happen in the Old Testament.

Ezekiel 36:25-26

²⁵ I will sprinkle clean WATER on you, and you will be clean; I will CLEANSE YOU from all your impurities and from all your idols. ²⁶ I will give you a new heart and put a NEW SPIRIT in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

Spiritual Regeneration- the new birth. And then just a chapter later God illustrates this spiritual birth powerfully. He takes Ezekiel into a valley of dry bones and asks if these dead bones could come alive. Only you know, God. And then God commands the winds to blow, pouring out His Spirit to breathe life, put on flesh, walking around...

John 3:9-10

⁹ "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. ¹⁰ "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things?"

He had evidently viewed acceptance by God like so many of his Jewish contemporaries did. He thought that his heritage (ancestry, position, works, all that made him what he was) was adequate to get him into the kingdom and make him acceptable to God. He had to realize that he needed a complete spiritual cleansing and renewal—that only God could provide by His Spirit! See it wasn't the external stuff, the religious duties that were the problem, it was the internal. For as externally extraordinary Nicodemus was even he had exactly the same sin problem you and I have that separated him from a holy perfect God.

Can you imagine how shocked he must have been? An old man, dedicating his whole life to religious observance and piety...to be told "You haven't moved an inch closer to the kingdom. You are at square one.

John Piper

We need to stop, and let ourselves feel the plight that Jesus said Nicodemus was in. He said Nicodemus was in a room where all the door handles were too high for him to reach. And then he said, "Come out. You must come out if you want to enter into the kingdom of God."

Ah, but there is good news. Jesus doesn't leave him stranded.

John 3:14-15

¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who **BELIEVES** may have eternal life in him."

Jesus is referencing an obscure story in Numbers 21. Israelites were being bitten by venomous snakes in the wilderness and they cry out to God, God instructs Moses to construct a bronze serpent to be lifted up on a pole so that when the people looked to the snake they would be healed. And quite possibly the only reason that story is in the Bible is so that it would point to Jesus. The one who would be lifted up, referencing his crucifixion on a cross. Everyone who looks to the cross of Jesus in faith would have eternal life, enter into the kingdom.

Don't you see, Nicodemus? You call me a teacher and Rabbi, but not Lord and Savior...**You think I've come to teach you, but I've come to save you!**

That's as far in the narrative as we want to go today because I want to talk about us. There is a basic rule of thumb- if the rule applies to the greatest, it applies to everyone else underneath. Michael Jordan was the best basketball player to ever live. I can imagine a scenario where the Bulls had a bad practice and Phil Jackson's upset and he calls everyone in and says, I need everyone to stay after practice and shoot 100 free throws. I can see all the eyes going to Michael...what's he going to do? He

picks up a basketball and goes to the line and starts shooting. Guess what everyone else does. They pick up a basketball and start shooting. Why? Because if the rule applies to the greatest it applies to everyone else under him.

What this text is saying is that if the great Nicodemus has to be born again so do you and I! Because there is no one in this room that came close to the self-righteousness that this man achieved. We have the same internal problem of the heart!

Jesus came to do far more than be a good teacher. He came to show us we need a savior and then to be the savior we need. And in case we think we are good enough and not a sinner, In the sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5 he says your sin problem is worse than you thought. You think it's just sin to murder, but anyone who is angry with someone in their heart is guilty. You think it's just sin to commit adultery, anyone who ever lusts in their heart is guilty, He said you should love your neighbors but you also must love your enemies.

And to make sure we are getting the point he gives us these statements as bookends-
Matthew 5:20

For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:48

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

How's that going for you?

Some of us think that "born againers" are those emotionally needy people, who really messed up, broken, dysfunctional people. But not me...This radical requirement to be spiritually born again is the great moral leveler. He said to Nicodemus, all these years of diligent keeping of the law and you are no further ahead than anyone else. You could be a pastor or a deacon and unless you have been born again you are no further spiritually than the drug dealer or murder...all that matters is the new birth.

And the same good news that applies to Nicodemus applies to us.

Jesus did for us what we were completely incapable of doing...birthing ourselves. Who does that? Does the baby or the mother? Whose anguish and labor brings us into the world? Mother, Whose anguish and labor brings up into the kingdom of God? Jesus.

Remember the question that Pastor Todd asked the flight attendant, Diana? **Who is Jesus to you?**

John 3:16

For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son that whosoever believes in Him would not perish but have eternal life.

Is Jesus just a good teacher? Is he just a moral example? Is he just another prophet?
Or is he the Son of God and your savior?

Invitation