

# I Met Jesus: Nicodemus

## John 3:1-9

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I read this week of how they found Elvis Presley when they discovered his dead body. He was lying prone on the ground. Beneath him were two books open. One was a book on the Shroud of Turin and the other was a Bible. I think Elvis may have been looking for something.

It might be the same thing you are looking for. U2's famous lyrics summarize a whole lot about being human:

*I have climbed highest mountains  
I have run through the fields  
Only to be with you  
Only to be with you  
I have run  
I have crawled  
I have scaled these city walls  
These city walls  
Only to be with you  
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for (Bono, I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For, U2)*

Looking for something. Imagine if you were supposed to be the expert, the answer man, but your soul kept saying something's missing. That is the irony of the life of our character study today. He was Israel's answer man but the answers he was giving failed to answer the questions and the search of his soul.

*"Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews." (Verse 1)*

### **Who was Nicodemus?**

His name means, *Conqueror of the People*. That's a pretty good summary of him. Nicodemus was a very important and powerful man. What do we know?

### **"Teacher of Israel"**

In a country that prized knowledge of the Old Testament, to be a teacher of the Law was to be in the upper echelon of society. He was a professor and all of Israel was his classroom. Think of the respect a famous professor has as he walks the campus of a major university. Nicodemus had this throughout the country. He was well-known and highly respected.

### **Highly educated**

To rise to this place, Nicodemus would have attained the highest levels of academic achievement available in his day. He was one of these guys with lots of academic letters after his name.

## **Religiously powerful – a “Pharisee”**

The Pharisees were the most religiously influential group of the day in Israel. They were admired by the people as very spiritual. Their teachings were hugely influential in the common man’s understanding of how to live in a manner pleasing to God. The Pharisees’ great mistake was that they externalized the law and failed to understand that God relates first to our hearts. The Pharisees hated Jesus and were the leading conspirators in His murder. Nicodemus was a Pharisee.

## **Politically powerful – member of the “Sanhedrin” (a ruler of the Jews)**

The Sanhedrin in Jerusalem was the ruling party. These were the aristocrats; the politically connected. Other than the Romans, the Sanhedrin was the most powerful group of people in Israel. Nicodemus was a member of this group. He was a powerful man.

## **Rich**

Later in the story, Nicodemus is going to reveal his wealth in a most unusual way.

So here’s his profile. He’s a highly educated and highly respected professor who is at the same time a religious and political figure who was connected at the highest levels of society and exercised these privileges in the capital city of Jerusalem. Nicodemus was a very important man.

## **Nicodemus represented the best the Jewish religion of the day had to offer**

This will be important in the interaction to come.

*This man came to Jesus by night. (Verse 2)*

I thought about calling this message, Nick at Nite but it seemed a little inappropriate. It stands to reason that a man of his stature could hardly be seen publicly (though we’re not told explicitly why) with the controversial teacher from the backwoods of Galilee. In the eyes of the religious Aristocrats, Jesus was like Larry Bird, *the hick from French Lick*.

To be seen with Jesus or worse, to seek Him out for guidance, would destroy Nicodemus’ reputation and standing as a teacher in Israel. It would legitimize Jesus and the Pharisees were doing everything they could to discredit and disgrace Him. I believe this is why he came at night. He was curious and intrigued and apparently, *he still hadn’t found what he was looking for*. Perhaps a little like you?

Can you imagine this? Nicodemus walks quietly through the streets to where Jesus is staying. He is hoping nobody recognizes him. He may have worn a head-covering pulled tight to hide his identity. He had weighed the risk of this and even as he walked his mind told him to go home, but his heart spurred him on.

Can you see him at the door? Big breath. Knock, knock, knock. Someone answers the door. “Yes?”

“I was wondering if I could speak with Jesus?”

“It’s late and He is tired.”

“Yes, I only want a few moments.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Nicodemus.”

"Nicodemus? You're the last person I expected to see here." Perhaps Jesus hears this and says, "Friend, Let him in. I will speak with him." His clothes, his jewelry, his manner all say, "I'm important." But Jesus saw Nicodemus for who he really was, a man looking for and needing the truth.

## What Happened?

*"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." Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"* (Verses 2-3)

Time doesn't allow us to go verse by verse through what Jesus says. We must understand it generally as it explains how meeting Jesus changed Nicodemus. Remember that I said Nicodemus represented the best Judaism had to offer. In many ways, these two men stand for two radically different pursuits of God. Let's see how.

Nicodemus begins by admitting something, *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.* (Verse 2) Right away we see that he is not a Jesus-hater. Nicodemus had watched from afar, seen and heard of His miracles, and concluded that Jesus' ministry was affirmed by God. What would you expect Jesus to say? *How very nice of you to say it. Thank you. Glad you have come to that conclusion.* There is none of that from Jesus because He knows Nicodemus' heart and He knows what is keeping Him from entering the kingdom of God.

Jesus had the uncanny ability to speak directly to the very thing the person really needed even if they didn't know it. Remember the rich young ruler? He was full of pride in his spiritual achievements. Jesus says to him, *Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor...and come, follow me.* (Luke 18:22) What?

This is a similar moment. There's no friendly banter. Jesus places His finger on Nicodemus' central issue – how a man is made right with God. *Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.* (Verse 3) Jesus sweeps away everything Nicodemus stood for; everything he trusted in for his salvation – his status, his accomplishments, his obedience of the law. All of it is swept away. Can you hear Nicodemus' thoughts? *Does He realize who He is talking to? I am praised everywhere I go for my spirituality. I am the teacher of Israel!*

*Nicodemus, your whole belief system is based on the false premise that salvation comes based on what you do and who you are.* Jesus uses a fascinating metaphor for what is required. *Born again.* Clearly Nicodemus is bewildered. *What?* His response is almost funny. It shows just how fundamentally confused he was. *Can [a man] enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?* (Verse 4) He basically asks, *Do we crawl back in and do it over?* That's an image you're going to struggle to get out of your mind for the rest of the day. What is obviously happening? Nicodemus is thinking physical rebirth and Jesus is speaking about spiritual rebirth.

*Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."* (Verses 5-8)  
What is Jesus getting at here?

## Where Does Salvation Come From?

Nicodemus represents the religious man. Sincere. Very devout. But his faith rested in what he had done. His accomplishment. His merit. His obedience of the Old Testament law and his practice of the Levitical system at the temple. His belief was that salvation was like climbing a ladder and everything you do brings you closer to God. He had quite a spiritual resume. Jesus shreds it. "It doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter what you've accomplished. It doesn't matter if you are a teacher, politician, or spiritual leader. To enter eternal life, you have to be born again." That is not something that you do, that is something God does.

This is later developed in the New Testament and called regeneration. God makes our spiritually dead hearts alive so that we want to believe. This is a work of the Holy Spirit who is like the wind, who blows wherever He desires to bring life to whomever He chooses. We are born again of the Spirit's work in us so that salvation does not come from human effort. Nicodemus and Jesus represent two very different ways to God.

### **Nicodemus**

*From man  
Truth from below  
Salvation by human effort  
Outward religion  
Look what I did*

### **Jesus**

*From God/The Spirit  
Truth from above  
Salvation by divine act  
Inward change  
Look what Christ did*

For a man who built his entire life and faith on qualifying for salvation based on his own effort, this was too much. His last words in this conversation show his bewilderment, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet do not understand these things?" (Verses 9-10)

I don't think this is mockery; this is Jesus pointing out that this is a most basic truth. Salvation comes from God. John 1:12 says, "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." (John 1:12) Only eternity will reveal how many people are like Nicodemus. Religious, but lost. Spiritually accomplished, but lost. Pious, but lost. Why? They trust in their religiousness, their accomplishment, and their piety. *I have done this. I have achieved that.* Jesus' words are as poignant as ever, *Unless [you are] born again, [you] cannot see the kingdom of God.*

Here is where "birth" is helpful. I want you to think carefully back to when you were born. Think. What did you contribute to the process of your birth? Nothing at all. Somebody birthed you. No baby has every come out and said, "Ta-da!" So it is with rebirth. We don't do it. God does it. We simply receive it and that receiving is for us believing. This is where John 3:16 fits in the story. A religious man is trying to understand that religion doesn't save him. How? *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.* (Verse 16) What is our contribution? Does anyone arrive in heaven and say, "Ta-da"? We don't climb the ladder to God; God comes down the ladder to us in the person of Christ.

How about you today? If you were sitting in the chair next to Jesus and He looked into your heart, past all the props of the church you attend and your Bible knowledge and that great thing you did for God 20 years ago, He would see past your resume to the real you. There He would perceive what you are really relying upon for entrance into the kingdom of God. Would Jesus peer there and look you in the eye and say, "Unless you shred your resume

and set aside what you perceive you have done for me, you will never enter the kingdom of God." "How can these things be?" you ask. *As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must [I] be lifted up, that whoever believes in [me] may have eternal life* (Verses 14-15). "Your resume lifts you up. It makes you and your works your salvation. If that would work, I wouldn't have needed to come. I was put on that cross. I died for your sin. Believe in me, and the transformation in you will feel to you like you've been born again." Is He saying that to you today, Nicodemus?

We don't know how it ended, but here's what we do know. Nicodemus pops up in John 7 at a gathering of the Sanhedrin. They are condemning Jesus. Guess who speaks up to mildly defend Him? The guy who came to see him at night. What's going on? Something's changing. Nicodemus is starting to find his spiritual backbone, but it's nothing like his third appearance in the story. After Jesus dies on the cross, John writes what happened,

*"After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there."* (John 19:38-42)

Well, well, well. The man who came secretly at night is now the man who in the day, not only identifies himself with Jesus, but personally cares for Jesus' body – not at night, but in broad daylight; in plain sight of all Jerusalem. He shows up with an extravagant gift of spices. 75 pounds. Can you see this? He and Joseph take Jesus' body down. How do you remove a crucified body? Nail by nail. He catches Jesus' limp body as it falls. He carries Jesus' bloody body to the tomb. No doubt Jesus' blood was smearing all over his clothes. Arriving at the Garden tomb, Nicodemus carefully lifts arms and legs and round and round wraps Jesus' body with linens. He inserts spices in the wraps. He anoints His body for burial. Placing Jesus' body in the tomb, perhaps Nicodemus' own hands were the last to touch Jesus' before His resurrection. What was Nicodemus thinking? I have to believe in his mind was the night they met. *Nicodemus, you can't do it. Salvation is from above. God sent his Son. I am that Son.* That's all we know.

## **Two Applications from the life of Nicodemus**

### **Night or Day?**

Jesus continues to this day to have many people seeking Him hoping to find what they're looking for. Many of these people are quite willing to do so in the dark. At night. When it's safe. Is that you? You cannot deny He is the Christ, but you want that relationship on your terms; when being a follower doesn't do damage to your reputation or career or standing in your circles.

Ever spoken up for Him in the Sanhedrins of your life? Ever identified yourself as a Jesus follower when to do so may cost you? I want you to see in Nicodemus what happens when you are born again of the Spirit. In the daytime. With all Jerusalem watching. Your clothes stained with Jesus' blood. Night or day, friend? A genuine faith encounter with Jesus changes us. It's the difference between night and day.

## Jesus, Friend of Sinners

It's wonderful to think about this story from Jesus' perspective. That night, there was a knock at the door. He heard the sound of Nicodemus saying, "May I see Jesus?" As Jesus sat there, did He know that this self-righteous aristocrat would one day defend Him to the ruling party? Did He know that He would show up carrying a lavish gift for His burial? Did He know that the hands of the one before Him would take His body off the cross? Wrap His body with the very grave clothes through which His resurrected body would pass? Be the last hands to touch His body in the grave? Did He know that this Nicodemus, so filled with self-importance, would someday humble himself and be born again?

Of course He did. It is not just the leper and the adulterer and the tax collector that Jesus receives; He receives the spiritually pompous as well. He loves us, too. He sees what we will be when we get over ourselves; when we are born of the Spirit. I am sure we have the physically infirm here. We have the financially poor here. But if there is a category we overflow in here, it is the spiritually proud. I'll stand in the front of that line. This is why I love the story of Nicodemus. It tells me that Jesus loves me too.

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