

Nicodemus

By: Rev. Chad Trivett

It was nearly time for the Passover festival in Israel.

People were preparing, celebrating, taking the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple.

Everyone knew Jesus was in town. *'Did you hear what he did at the temple yesterday?'*

"He made a whip and went thrashing and whipping through the temple court!"

"Whaaat?" "No!"

"Yes!" "He was screaming and yelling, 'This is supposed to be a house of prayer and you've made it a house for thieves!'"

"Wow, what a crazy man!"

"You should have seen it, the tax collectors, money changers all went running! He wrecked all the tables turning them over – spilling everything everywhere! He even opened all the cages so the animals could get away! Cows, sheep, birds everywhere - It was pure mayhem!"

"Cool!"

"I heard he's done amazing miracles – healed people. Signs from God that he's a prophet."

"Yes, I heard he even turned water into wine at a wedding in Cana!"

"Oh, I like that! Sounds like my kind of prophet!"

Jesus was well known – not only among the people but among the religious and political leaders in Israel.

Everyone wanted to meet Jesus – but not everyone liked Jesus.

The majority of the religious leaders didn't like Jesus. Whenever there was an encounter with them there was a fight – an argument, a disagreement – usually starts by Jesus saying something offensive to them.

The Pharisees, Sadducees, teachers of the law didn't like his new teaching or his love for morally questionable people.

The religious and political council of Israel, the Sanhedrin, didn't like Jesus very much either.

When Rome had conquered Israel they allowed a council made up of Jewish leadership to deal with issues specific to Israel. This Sanhedrin, a political and religious council, answered to Rome.

They didn't like Jesus because he didn't follow many of the traditions and teachings of the religious parties that made up the council.

Nicodemus
By: Rev. Chad Trivett

Jesus also had the air of rebellion, sedition – the ability to emotionally move large crowds of people.

It was the Sanhedrin that became the driving force in the plot against Jesus.

However, there were some, some of the powerful religious leaders who saw something more in Jesus.

How did Jesus do the wonderful miracles and signs? Could someone do such things were God not with him?

There was one such man who wanted to know.

Reading from John chapter 3, verses 1-10;

“There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee.”²

After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. “Rabbi,” he said, “we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you.”

³ *Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.”*

⁴ *“What do you mean?” exclaimed Nicodemus. “How can an old man go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?”*

⁵ *Jesus replied, “I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit.”⁶*

Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life.⁷ So don’t be surprised when I say, ‘You must be born again.’⁸

The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can’t tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can’t explain how people are born of the Spirit.”

⁹ *“How are these things possible?” Nicodemus asked.*

¹⁰ *Jesus replied, “You are a respected Jewish teacher, and yet you don’t understand these things?”*

Late at night, Nicodemus sought out Jesus.

He walked quickly and purposefully through the streets of Jerusalem to the place where Jesus was staying.

When his disciples saw him – this well known, politically powerful, rich religious leader, they did not hesitate to show due respect and give him audience with Jesus.

Even the disciples could see in his demeanor, Nicodemus had not come to fight or argue with Jesus, but to learn and discover what it was that empowered Jesus to do what he did.

Nicodemus
By: Rev. Chad Trivett

As a Pharisee, Nicodemus would have spent years, starting a formal education at the age of 12, to learn the scriptures, the religious law and the various interpretations of them.

Nicodemus was smart, wise and socially astute.

He had not only become a Rabbi, but became a leader in the most popular religious/political party, the Pharisees.

Among the Pharisees were chosen a few to sit on the Sanhedrin – the political council of Israel.

Nicodemus was one of those who had earned this privilege.

He was not your average Pharisee – Nicodemus had worked very hard to get where he was in life.

He was taking a risk to see Jesus. His colleagues would not have approved of one of their own genuinely seeking out Jesus to learn from him.

To fight with him - yes, to accuse him - yes, but not to learn from him.

So Nicodemus goes at night. When many are home, celebrating, preparing for the Passover.

Hoping he would not be noticed and have to give answer for his clandestine meeting with Jesus.

The disciples lead him in and bring him before Jesus.

The room goes quiet as everyone feels the presence of these two powerful leaders.

“What’s going to happen? Will they argue? Why is Nicodemus here? What does he want? His posture says he’s not here for a fight – but to learn!”

The disciples could hardly believe their eyes. You could cut the tension in the air with a bread knife – the silence in that moment was deafening loud!

Then Nicodemus spoke,

“Rabbi,” he said, “we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you.”

To the disciple’s amazement, Nicodemus acknowledges that God is with Jesus.

Nicodemus gives the respect and honour most religious leaders would never consider giving Jesus.

To mention the miraculous signs as evidence that God is with Jesus is far more than an observation and personal conviction.

Nicodemus is citing God’s criteria of a prophet in Deuteronomy 18:19 - the scriptures he knows so well.

Nicodemus
By: Rev. Chad Trivett

Yes, there is scriptural precedence to acknowledge God is with Jesus – not that the common person needed such precedence – the signs, wonders – his acceptance and love of those typically rejected by the leaders – was all the people needed to believe God was with him.

There was no question as to whether or not Jesus performed miraculous signs – but the Pharisees and religious leaders accused Jesus of doing them by the power of the devil, not the power of God.

What a stupid argument – and the people knew it was, so did Nicodemus.

In his heart Nicodemus knew he needed to learn from Jesus – so he risks ridicule from his fellow higher ups and finds himself in the presence of Jesus.

Jesus replies to Nicodemus, *“I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.”*

Born again? What does that mean? Why is he telling me this?

‘I mean, in my Jewish tradition, when one converts to Judaism we baptize them – and compare the new convert to a newborn child, but that can’t be what he means.’

I’m already a believer – I’m one of the most dedicated and sincere God followers in Israel!

It doesn’t make sense that he’s saying this to me.

“What do you mean?” exclaimed Nicodemus. “How can an old man go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?”

It is here Jesus elaborates, to refocus Nicodemus spiritual outlook on life.

Part of Nicodemus problem was his religiosity – his dedication to follow the law – as sincere as it was. All his effort to be a good person was the stumbling block to understand the key to seeing the Kingdom of God.

Jesus replied, “I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit.”⁶

Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life.⁷ So don’t be surprised when I say, ‘You must be born again.’⁸

The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can’t tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can’t explain how people are born of the Spirit.”

To be born of water and Spirit – do you mean one must be water baptized and Spirit baptized to see the Kingdom of God?

No – the reference to water is one of repentance, one’s recognition that they need a Saviour.

It’s not the water but that which water represents – to Nicodemus it would have meant repentance, a humbling of oneself before God – the symbol of a spiritual cleansing brought on by the posture of the heart in faith.

Nicodemus
By: Rev. Chad Trivett

To see the Kingdom of God also requires a work of the Spirit. This can only be done by God.

You can't do it, I can't do it – not one of us can – this new birth of the spirit, a transformation on the inside, is only accomplished by God's Spirit.

Nicodemus – you, and all your religious colleagues – cannot produce what's needed to see the Kingdom of God.

The path you are on to see the Kingdom of God will never get you there.

Let me fix your spiritual GPS and point you in the right direction.

All your religious rules, your extreme following of the law, your ceremonies, the clothes you wear, the prayers you recite – will never enable you to see the Kingdom of God.

And that which you need to see the Kingdom of God only comes from God – you cannot produce it, no one can produce it.

This is a difficult lesson.

We all like control don't we?

We all want to know 'what can I do to get into heaven'.

What does God want me to do and I'll do it!

Nicodemus was fanatical about doing what was right.

How does one change an entire mind set?

Nicodemus focus was on doing the right thing, Jesus says his focus needs to change.

The focus needs to be on faith which brings about a spiritual rebirth from within – work only the Spirit can do.

We cannot control it, we cannot produce it, or fake it, or induce it – it's like the wind, God will do it – it's beyond our control.

You cannot systematize the working of the Spirit – Just like all your rules are trying to do Nicodemus.

You cannot use the things of God, the things of the Spirit for your own agendas – one must yield to God's Spirit – only then we can partake in the dance with Him.

"How are these things possible?" Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰ Jesus replied, "You are a respected Jewish teacher, and yet you don't understand these things?"

Why was he slow to learn? Because he grew up in a religious environment that required tremendous effort to please God.

Nicodemus
By: Rev. Chad Trivett

Jesus spirituality is completely different. A completely new creature is needed for new life and no amount of effort can achieve this.

It's humanly impossible – that is why Jesus says *Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life.*

This was an entirely new approach to spirituality than the one Nicodemus had grown up with.

Jesus is trying to open Nicodemus eyes to see new life is found in faith in him – not trying to produce the new life ourselves by following laws, rules or other such religious exercise.

Imagine the disciples as they watched and listened to this dialogue between them.

Peter leans over to Andrew and whispers “*I’m just a fisherman and I get it, what’s wrong with this guy!?*”

All of us have ‘Nicodemus’ syndrome.

As we grow up we are told how to think about things, how to interpret things, how to think and how to act.

Traditions build up and reinforce ideas that may not necessarily reflect the teaching the traditions were meant to follow.

Nicodemus should have known this. Just as Jesus pointed out.

The notion of a new beginning and a decisive inner transformation of a person’s life is also found in certain OT passages. Passages that Nicodemus would have been very familiar with – yet he missed the message.

Jer.31:33-34 ³³ “*But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel after those days,*” says the Lord. “*I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write them on their hearts.*”

Ezek. 11:19 “*And I will give them singleness of heart and put a new spirit within them. I will take away their stony, stubborn heart and give them a tender, responsive heart*”

Ezek.36:25-27 “*Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away, and you will no longer worship idols.* ²⁶ *And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart.* ²⁷ *And I will put my Spirit in you*”

What does this story say to us?

What is the message from Jesus to us today?

That our meeting here together is not about playing church or following a certain code of behavior in order to please God.

We are not here to fulfil Christian rituals and practices.

Nicodemus
By: Rev. Chad Trivett

We are not here to keep tabs on one another to make sure we are behaving as we think others should behave.

No – none of that.

We are here that we may take those steps of faith and experience a transformation within by God's Spirit.

We are here seeking a genuine experience of God that changes us.

We are here to experience a regeneration that is available in Jesus Christ.

To become the people God intends us to be, we need a spiritual rebirth.

This spiritual transformation is available to all of us – and all of us need it.

Jesus points this out when he says *you must be born again*. That YOU is plural. Jesus is referring to not only Nicodemus but everyone he represented.

The highly educated, the religious, the moral and respected.

I like how Merrill Tenny says it in his book *John – The Gospel of Belief* on this passage of Jesus and Nicodemus where he says:

“God's mysteries are not the heritage of the learned, the moral, or the religious simply because of learning, morality or religion; they are the heritage of the spiritually transformed.”

How many of you have experienced this rebirth of the spirit at one time or another in your life?

I have – that's why I'm here.

I remember before I became a Christian going to a new Church my parents had started to attend.

I was in high school at the time – playing in a rock band, doing the bar scene, playing competitive hockey, riding motorcycles, chasing girls.

My parents asked if I'd like to go to church with them- so I did. Although I thought the world would be a better place without religion, I wasn't antagonistic to it.

It was a very charismatic Pentecostal church – something I had never seen before.

The people were super friendly, warm and welcoming – fanatical in their worship – but they had a full band for the worship music which I totally connected with – and they were good!

Every once and a while I'd go back to 'The Funny Farm' as I aptly nicknamed it.

And I heard them talk about being born again.

One day driving with my Mom, I asked her “How do you know when you're born again?”

She said “You just know.”

What I was really asking was, “Is this real?”

Nicodemus
By: Rev. Chad Trivett

Is this born again thing really real?

I am the type of person that is not interested in faking anything. For some reason that's just the way I am for as long as I can remember.

Then one day, on August 15th, 1989, at 11:00 pm, I was home alone and asked Jesus to help me – to come into my life.

In that moment, in an instant, I felt a warmth wash over me that left in its wake the most incredible joy and love and peace I have ever felt.

I never knew feeling like that was even possible.

This was it – this is exactly what the phrase 'born again' was meant to describe.

I know the phrase 'born again' has been abused and over used.

We should be careful not to let its common fare usages detract from what Jesus is saying.

Jesus uses the imagery of being born again to explain the work of the Spirit that comes into our lives when we genuinely put our faith in Him.

It's a real experience that cannot be faked or produced ourselves – it happens to us.

It changes your very thoughts and desires – inclinations that were once there can no longer be conjured up.

But eventually this feeling goes away.

And you wonder what do to with it now?

It was certainly real when it happened – it lingered afterward, but eventually faded off.

We experience the Kingdom of God for a moment in our lives and share the experiences the disciples, Paul and many others we read in history have had.

This moment of spiritual birth needs to happen again, and again and again if we are to be the people God has called us to be.

If not, we subtly go back to putting in effort to be who we know we are supposed to be. This is the life of Nicodemus.

No – in order to live as Jesus has called us to, we need a continual connection to God's Spirit.

Arthur Gossip in the Interpreters Commentary says of being born again, *"If the new life is ever to be lived there must be a new creature, wholly new, built up in a new way, that mere efforts by oneself is of little or no use."*

Even with the best will in the world one cannot become what they must."

Nicodemus, to see the Kingdom of God you need a transformation of the spirit.

Nicodemus

By: Rev. Chad Trivett

We don't know if Nicodemus ever made that step of faith in Christ or not. We do know he advocated for Jesus at his death.

It was Nicodemus and his friend, Joseph of Arimathea, who asked permission from Pilate, the Roman Governor, to take Jesus body from the cross.

Together they brought about 75 pounds of myrrh's and aloes and supplied one of their own tombs to give Jesus a proper burial.

Did they simply admire Jesus from a distance or did they eventually put their faith in Christ and experience the birth of the spirit?

Will we admire Jesus from a distance or perchance place our faith in Him and experience new life in the spirit?

To all of us today, if we want to see the Kingdom of God, we need a transformation of our spirit.

John includes the story of Nicodemus in his gospel so that we would believe in the name of Jesus Christ and have life in his name.

John is contrasting the religious approach to God by Nicodemus and the Pharisees to the spiritual approach to God of Jesus.

Personally, I prefer Jesus teaching on spirituality and would like to study, learn and apply what he said in hopes that I may again experience the transformation of the spirit.

If any of us struggle with knowing God, with being who we know we are intended to be, who wrestle with who we are on the inside and yet are powerless to change it –

If we ever have a hope to see and experience the Kingdom of God, remember, we must be born again.

Amen.

Exp. Exp. "This is what I have made of my life; and it cannot be changed now. But the whole point of the gospel is that God can do just that for anyone; for you and me. We have experienced it in some real measure in our own. How? Ah, says Christ, that is unpredictable, mysterious, and divine. The wind comes who knows how, cleansing, invigorating, freshening, and then – it is gone. So does God break in – who can guess where, who can tell when?" pg.506

Me – you cannot systematize the working of the Spirit – Just like all your rules are trying to do Nicodemus. You cannot use the things of God, the things of the Spirit for your own agendas – one must yield to God's Spirit - then we can partake in the dance with Him.

Nicodemus

By: Rev. Chad Trivett

We engage in 'endless activities and innumerable agencies that often seem to have small trace of spiritual purpose or significance.'