

JESUS ROCKS NICODEMUS' WORLD

John 3:1-21 / Yeshua §§33

Next Week: Celebration of Our Country

In 1989 I graduated seminary and was hired as assistant pastor at my home church, Grace Baptist Church of Santa Maria. It would seem everything was going my way. But shortly after being hired, I experienced a crisis of faith. Was I pastoring because I really believed Christianity was true or because I was raised a Christian?

I knew that Christianity stands or falls on the resurrection of Jesus. I took several months to study the evidence both inside and especially outside of the Bible for the resurrection of Jesus. My approach was, "Is there enough quality evidence to convince an open-minded person that Jesus literally, physically came back to life?"

The evidence I discovered convinced me that the resurrection of Jesus is a historical fact. With my crisis of faith resolved I was able to serve in ministry with confidence and joy.

As we continue the story of *Yeshua: Messiah King* we find Jesus still in Jerusalem celebrating the feast of Passover. A prominent Rabbi initiates an evening meeting with Jesus. Little did he know that this man from Nazareth was about to rock his world.

WHO WAS NICODEMUS? (JOHN 3:1)

JOHN 3:1 (ESV)

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

A Ruler of the Jews

As John records, Nicodemus was a *Pharisee* and a *ruler of the Jews*. Later, Jesus refers to Nicodemus as the Teacher of Israel. Nicodemus was one of the most prominent, accomplished men in all Israel.

As a *ruler of the Jews* Nicodemus was a member of the Great Sanhedrin.

The Great Sanhedrin was the highest judicial court in Israel similar to our supreme court. It was the final authority on Jewish law. The Great Sanhedrin consisted of 71 men. The Great Sanhedrin met daily in the Chamber of Hewn Stones in Herod's Temple in Jerusalem. They were led by a president called the **nasi** (lit. "prince") and a vice president called the **av bet din** (lit. "father of the court"). The Great Sanhedrin dealt with criminal matters and religious matters.

The Great Sanhedrin drew men from various factions of Israeli society. Many were Sadducees. Pharisees were also represented. John makes clear Nicodemus *was a man of the Pharisees*.

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A Pharisee

In contrast to elitist Sadducees, Pharisees came from the common people. They were neither political nor materialistic. It was their devotion to the Law of Moses and the Oral Law (the traditions of the elders), that set them apart. Pharisees believed in the immortality of the soul, the existence of angels, divine providence, freedom of will and the resurrection of the dead at the time of the coming of Messiah. They also believed in **the merit of the fathers** which taught that all those descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would enter the Messianic Kingdom. The Mishnah (Oral Law) reads.

All Israelites have a share in the world to come, for it is written, Thy people also shall be all righteous, they shall inherit the land for ever; the branch of my planting, the work of my hands that I may be glorified.¹

A common myth at that time was that Abraham sat at the gates of Hell to snatch back any Jew that had mistakenly been assigned to Hell.²

As a Pharisee, Nicodemus was very familiar with the idea of being *born again*. Being *born again* means attaining a new status. There were six ways a man could be *born again* in Pharisaic Judaism:

1. Gentile conversion to Judaism.
2. Being crowned King of Israel.
3. Undergoing Bar Mitzvah at the age of 13.³
4. Marriage.⁴
5. Ordination as a Rabbi.⁵
6. Promotion to head a rabbinic school.⁶

Nicodemus had been born again four times (#3-#6). Nicodemus was the epitome of a devout Pharisee.

The Teacher of Israel

Nicodemus was the head of a rabbinical academy. As the Rosh Yeshiva he oversaw the instruction and administration of the school. He taught the highest-level course and determined which students would be approved to pursue ordination as rabbis. Nicodemus was the Rabbi of rabbis.

¹ M. Sanhedrin (10, 1).

² There are a few exceptions, that is, not all Israelites will be in the Kingdom. The Mishnah declares that those Jews who deny the resurrection or doubt the Law of Moses came from heaven or speak God's name according to its letters or is an atheist, a slanderer or is uncircumcised or reads heretical books will not inherit a portion in the Kingdom.

³ Bar Mitzvah means "a son of the commandment". After one's Bar Mitzvah, a male was considered an adult and responsible for his own sins. Undoubtedly Nicodemus underwent this process when he was 13.

⁴ It was required of the rulers of the Jews that they be married, so we know Nicodemus was married.

⁵ Nicodemus was a Rav, a high-level rabbi. As *the teacher of Israel*, Nicodemus had to be an ordained rabbi.

⁶ A Rosh Yeshiva was the head of a rabbinic school. Jesus refers to Nicodemus as the teacher of Israel in 3:10 indicating he was a Rosh Yeshiva, a Rabban (the teacher), the head of a rabbinic academy.

Nicodemus was one of the most prominent, accomplished men in all Israel. In our culture He would be a Supreme Court Justice, with a postdoctorate in Theology serving as President of Yale's School of Divinity.

It is probable Nicodemus was in the Temple complex when Jesus cleansed it. It is also probable Nicodemus listened and watched as Jesus taught and performed miraculous signs. To his credit, Nicodemus was intrigued and invited Jesus to meet. That the meeting took place in the evening was probably out of necessity because Jesus was busy during the day.

JESUS REVEALS THE NEW REQUIREMENT TO ENTER THE MESSIANIC KINGDOM (JOHN 3:1-8)

JOHN 3:1-8 (ESV)

1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "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." 3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." 4 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?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 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."

The Rabbi of rabbis respectfully referred to Jesus as *Rabbi* acknowledging Jesus' Scriptural expertise and divine ordination. From what he heard and observed, Nicodemus was convinced Jesus was from God. Clearly, Nicodemus desired to discuss Jesus' claims further.

Unintimidated by Nicodemus, Jesus took control of the conversation. He spoke to Nicodemus in a manner no rabbi would dare speak; He spoke in His own name. The **Mishnah**⁷ demanded that anyone interpreting the Scriptures must do so in the name of the rabbi who taught him:

R. Hiyya b. Nehemiah said: If a disciple [thinks there is] no necessity to quote a teaching in the name of his master, his knowledge of Torah will in the future be forgotten; and shall not the master apply himself to his disciple for this reason!

Here is an example of the formula that was followed:

Simeon bar Ba in the name of R. Yohanan: "The teachings of scribes are more beloved than teachings of Torah..."

Throughout this exchange, Jesus spoke in His own name:

Truly, truly I say to you...

Even Nicodemus would never have spoken in his own name.

Not only did Jesus speak authoritatively in His own name; He spoke with intensity. *Truly* translates the Greek word, "amen". It affirms that what is said is an absolutely certain truth. Jesus was stressing to Nicodemus that what He was saying was absolutely true.

⁷ The Mishnah is the written form of the Oral Law.

Why did Jesus speak so adamantly to Nicodemus?

First, what Jesus revealed went contrary to Nicodemus' lifelong beliefs regarding entry into the Messianic Kingdom; it would be extremely difficult for him to accept. Second, if he did accept these truths, he could potentially influence many people to believe and be saved.

What did Jesus reveal that was so revolutionary?

Jesus revealed that entry into the Messianic Kingdom requires a spiritual birth by the Spirit. At this point in human history, this is a new development in God's program of salvation. As Jesus will teach, spiritual birth by the Spirit will become possible as the result of His being *lifted up* (3:14-15).

The *kingdom of God* is the Messianic Kingdom. It is the literal kingdom here on earth over which the Messiah will reign. The *kingdom of God* is not heaven; that would not have been understood by first century Jews.

Prior to the cross, the means of entry into the Messianic Kingdom was faith in the blood sacrifice God provided in each Dispensation.⁸ From Moses to the Cross a person gained entry into the Messianic Kingdom by trusting that God forgave a person's sins by transferring the guilt of his sins to the innocent animals sacrificed in his place.

The Pharisees, however, taught entry into the Messianic Kingdom was secured by keeping both the Law of Moses and the Oral Law. The failsafe for all but the most ungodly Jews, was "the merit of the fathers". The Pharisees were wrong on both counts. Entry into the Messianic Kingdom was never by keeping the Mosaic or Oral Laws nor by "the merit of the fathers."

Nicodemus didn't understand the idea of spiritual birth as is obvious by his response. He was astonished by Jesus' revelation. This went contrary to beliefs he had held all his life. This created a monumental crisis in Nicodemus.

Who was he going to believe?

JESUS INSISTS NICODEMUS SHOULD BELIEVE HIM (JOHN 3:9-13)

JOHN 3:9-13 (ESV)

9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? 11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

As many of us do when a long-held belief is challenged, Nicodemus pushed back; *How can these things be?*" He was struggling. He didn't immediately accept what Jesus revealed.

Who was he going to believe? He was schooled in the teachings of the rabbis that extended back to Ezra. Was he going to reject the teachings of the Pharisaic

⁸ Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum defines dispensations as "...separate periods of time in which God dispenses His will in a specific and unique way, based on a covenant upon which a particular dispensation is founded."

establishment and embrace the teachings of this... what? Was He a prophet? Was He the Messiah? Now he's telling me He's descended from heaven and that's why I should believe Him. Maybe He's a crank and it's time to end this meeting.

But Nicodemus knew Jesus wasn't crazy.

He had the righteous indignation and courage to cleanse the Temple.

He taught the Scriptures with authority and great insight.

And the miracles; all those people healed....

Nicodemus couldn't walk away from Jesus, but he was struggling to understand and believe what Jesus revealed.

JESUS EXPLAINED THE WAY TO BE BORN AGAIN (JOHN 3:14-21)

JOHN 3:14-21 (ESV)

14 "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. 21 But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

In verse 9 Nicodemus exclaimed, *How can these things be?*" Here, Jesus explained how a person can be born again – born of the Spirit. It is by believing in what He will accomplish by being *lifted up*. Whether Nicodemus understood being *lifted up* as a reference to crucifixion we don't know. But he would understand Jesus' reference to the serpent *lifted up* in the wilderness (Numbers 21:4-9). God disciplined the complaining Israelites with poisonous snakes. He provided a way of deliverance from death by having Moses lift a bronze casting of a serpent high on a pole. All who looked in faith upon God's provision on the pole were saved; they were delivered from death.

Similarly, Jesus was revealing and prophesying at the same time to Nicodemus that in the future, all who look in faith upon God's provision - the Son of Man *lifted up* - will be saved and have eternal life. *Eternal life* here is synonymous with *born of the Spirit* (3:5-6).

As Jesus explained in verse 16, God's part of salvation was to provide His Son, man's part of salvation is to believe.

But why did God need to provide His Son?

First, because He loves us.

Second, because all human beings come into the world separated from God. We are *born of water*, that is, we have physical life. But we are not *born of the Spirit*, that is, we do not have spiritual life. We are dead to God. We are separated from God by our sin.

This is the condition of being condemned. We all have physical life, but we are all condemned without spiritual life because of our sin against God.

That's why we need a spiritual birth.

And as Jesus explained to Nicodemus, God gave Jesus to be *lifted up* so that all who believe in Him might be saved from condemnation. All who believe are born of the Spirit. They are no longer condemned. They are alive to God. And they will enter the Messianic Kingdom.

This is still future as of this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Jesus is revealing a new development in God's plan of salvation.

Jesus concluded by explaining why most people will choose not to believe. Most people will choose not to believe because they are content with their lives even though they are sinning against God. They don't care about God. They don't care about living according to God's standard of right and wrong. They don't care about living according to what is true. In fact, they resent God and His standards.

But there are people who do care about the truth. Jesus concludes on a hopeful note that I believe is meant to encourage Nicodemus. Nicodemus is one who is pursuing the truth. He's struggling to understand and believe what Jesus has revealed to him, but Jesus seems to be encouraging Nicodemus that he'll get there.

What Jesus revealed to Nicodemus applies to us today. If we want God; if we want to be alive to God, we must be born again. We must be born of the Spirit. We are born of the flesh and have physical life. But we are dead to God; we do not have spiritual life. We are condemned because of our self-centeredness and the sin it produces in us. Though we insult God and treat Him like dirt, He loves us. The Father gave the Son to be lifted up on the cross where Jesus suffered spiritual separation from God on our behalf. Jesus suffered our punishment and paid in full the debt we owed. If we look to the cross in faith and put all our confidence in Jesus, all our sin will be forgiven and we will be indwelt by the Holy Spirit. We will be *born of the Spirit* and our lives will begin to change. That's what Jesus was describing when He spoke of the wind; you can't see it, but you can see its effects. We can't see the Holy Spirit birthing us, but we can see the effects of spiritual birth through the ways our lives change.

Nicodemus' experience may be your experience. Believing in Jesus and His teachings may be a struggle for you as it was for Nicodemus. It may provoke a crisis, but Jesus is the One to Whom you should listen above all other teachers. His resurrection proves He is the Messiah and that all things He taught are true and trustworthy. But your will cannot commit to what your mind does not accept. Jesus doesn't ask us to have a "blind" faith. In fact, a "blind" faith is no faith at all. Nicodemus began to move towards Jesus because of the evidence he saw in Jesus' actions, teaching and miracles. These were reasons that convinced him to listen to Jesus. Ask your questions. Keep digging. Please know that our Elders, Pastors and Staff are here to help you in your journey.