

Nicodemus Visits Jesus

The irony in this scene illustrates the religious leaders' inability to recognize what is in front of their eyes. They have devoted their lives to the study of scripture, the Word of God, and do not recognize it in their midst. John's gospel is written to highlight testimony about who Jesus is. John's accounts are not always detailed, chronological descriptions of Jesus' life and ministry in the way Luke wrote his Gospel. John's focus is to present testimony that will illuminate understanding of who Jesus is and thereby bring belief and faith to the hearer or reader of his Gospel. To that end, John implements a variety of literary tools, symbolism being one such tool. This does not detract from the truth that John is setting forth; rather it serves to highlight the greater truth of the testimony. In this passage we will see one of John's greater themes of light vs. dark, here also illustrating the ignorance of the religious leaders of God's people.

Nicodemus might very likely have come to Jesus at night for a number of reasons, a couple of the most likely being, (1) fear of persecution from the other members of the Sanhedrin who were against Jesus; or, (2) it was a good time to speak without interruption with Jesus who during the daytime is followed by crowds of people seeking healing and/or wanting to hear his teaching. There is a third possibility. This is after all John's Gospel, so there could also be a symbolic meaning to a "night-time" visitation. A visit to Jesus in the dark of night gives "a picture of a man who was in an uneasy state of unbelief or doubt."¹ In this instance, nighttime could carry a meaning not so much as a dark/evil relationship, but dark as in a lack of understanding or knowledge. Nicodemus is "in the dark" as to who Jesus is. Jesus will present him with the *light of true knowledge* of God. This is one of the important themes running through the Gospel of John, and will be a focus of our lesson today.



Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." John 3:1-2 (NIV)

What do we know about Nicodemus?

Nicodemus is a Pharisee. The name "Pharisee" means "separated ones" referring to either separation from the masses, or separating themselves to the study and interpretation of the Law. Through their teachings and interpretations the Pharisees transformed Judaism from a religion focused on sacrifice for atonement of sin to a religion whose focus became adherence to a complex

¹ New American Commentary

system of laws. They believed righteousness is attained through adhering to a strict legalism. The sacrificial system was viewed more as obedience to law rather than the sacrifice itself carrying meaning of atonement. According to the Pharisees, righteousness came from *obeying the law*, rather than the mystery surrounding atonement sacrifices.

Nicodemus is a member of the ruling council, the Sanhedrin which was comprised of seventy elders primarily Sadducees and Pharisees. The Sanhedrin functioned much like a congress and a supreme court combined. It made laws, held trials, pursued justice and governed Israel. The Roman authorities permitted the Sanhedrin to continue to govern Israel but with limited jurisdiction.

Nicodemus recognizes that Jesus' power is from God because of the signs and miracles. He does not yet realize the meaning behind the signs – that Jesus is the awaited Messiah, but he is suspecting there is something unique and special about Jesus, prompting this nighttime visit. Signs point to reality. Whenever you see a sign or miracle, they point to who Jesus is - the Son of God. They testify to his *divinity* and his *mission* from God the Father. Nicodemus correctly asserts one truth in verse two, *"Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."* Jesus is able to perform these signs because God is with him. Nicodemus still misses the complete truth; he doesn't follow the sign beyond its physical manifestation. Jesus is able to perform these signs because he is *of* God; he is the Son of God. One of John's themes is Jesus' recurring call for people to recognize the witness (testimony) being given by the signs. The miraculous healings and miracles like water turned to wine are not the end of the message. They testify to the fact that only one person, the Son of God, could possibly create, bring life, renew, or recreate life. Every time a sign or miracle is encountered in the Gospels, take that sign to the next level and ask yourself, "To what does this testify about Jesus?"

Nicodemus is the pre-eminent teacher of Israel. In verse 10 Jesus says, *"You are Israel's teacher"*. A better translation might be: "you are *the* teacher of Israel" with a definite article emphasizing that Nicodemus is *the pre-eminent* teacher of the Law. He is the authority on the Law, the prophets, the Messiah, on anything pertaining to Judaism. We will see that for all his knowledge he lacks understanding.

Entering the Kingdom of God (v3-15)

Jesus' response to Nicodemus' praise and acknowledgment may at first glance seem rather deep and disjointed compared to Nicodemus' opening words. Jesus' remark is in reference to the miraculous signs that Nicodemus recognizes being from God, but failing to take that sign to the next step as to what (or to whom) those signs testify. Jesus tells him that the power of the kingdom of God can only be seen by those who have been born again (or also translated "born from above"). He is referring to being born of the Spirit. Nicodemus fails to understand this, thinking in a horizontal or physical reality of being literally born again, not "born from above".

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. (v5-6)

The mention of water here likely refers back to John the Baptist's ministry and baptisms symbolizing repentance, turning away from sin, to God, and being washed of that sin. Only God can forgive sin and renew (or recreate) a life. Being born of water – recalling repentance – and of Spirit is something done by God, by the Holy Spirit, to allow entrance into the Kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit gives life to a repentant and transformed soul. Spirit gives life to Spirit.

There are two distinct yet parallel realms: one is of fallen man (the flesh or physical) and the other is of God (the Spirit). A fallen person cannot renew himself; he needs a divine transformation. Only God's Holy Spirit can regenerate a human spirit.² Jesus is reminding Nicodemus that salvation only comes through faith and belief in God's ability to provide redemption. Righteousness is not achievable through "righteous living". Nicodemus is a Pharisee who believes that adherence to the law will achieve righteousness. He may have difficulty accepting the idea that in order to be part of the kingdom of God he must repent of his sins, turning in faith to God and not relying on his own abilities.

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."(v8)

This verse contains a wordplay which cannot be adequately expressed in English. The Greek word *pneuma* means both wind and Spirit. The work of the Spirit (Greek: *pneuma*) is invisible and mysterious like the blowing of the wind (also *pneuma*). Man controls neither.³ Being born of the Spirit is the work of the Spirit. It is an act of God. In verses 10-15 Jesus is pointing out that Nicodemus, Israel's foremost teacher who would have known the Jewish scriptures (Old Testament) thoroughly, does not grasp this concept. All that Nicodemus knows and understands is not sufficient because he does not have a relationship with the Spirit. Jesus has performed signs and miracles that attest to who he is and they ought to affirm that God has sent him to teach Israel in truth and knowledge of the Spirit. Nicodemus, representing all Israel, and in particular the religious leaders, does not understand or accept what he is teaching. Their own laws and ideas of righteousness are their stumbling block. Jesus asks Nicodemus how he can possibly discuss things of the Spirit if Nicodemus cannot grasp even the earthly things that Jesus has already revealed. Jesus is leading up to the whole reason he came from heaven, which is further expounded in verses 16-21.

A Sign that Leads to Life

"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 desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."(v13-15)

² Bible Knowledge Commentary

³ Ibid

No one has ever been to heaven, come from heaven and been able to teach these things of the Spirit. Jesus as the incarnation was in Heaven from the beginning, and came down from heaven with the express purpose to teach the things of heaven. Jesus next alludes to his resurrection, surely something beyond Nicodemus' understanding, and concludes with the statement that belief in him will be the way to eternal life.



Moses and the Snake: Read Numbers 21:4-9 and Psalm 78

Numbers 21:4-9 give us the context of the Moses and the Snake story; and Psalm 78 explains the source of Israel's complaints.

- Their spirits were not faithful to God (v8)
- They refused to obey God's law (v10)
- They forgot the miracles God had done for them (v11)

Our own complaining often has roots in one of these thoughtless actions or attitudes. The Israelites attention was on a horizontal focus. They were lost in fears and concerns of the present moment forgetting all that God had just done to rescue them from Egypt. They had forgotten all the miracles and how the hand of God had delivered them. Their horizontal focus and their fears were leading them to sin. God took drastic measures to draw their attention back to a vertical focus. Drastic measures were necessary. Physical manifestations were being taken for granted: they were led by a pillar of cloud or smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night. They were being fed by the hand of God with manna and quail, yet they lost sight of the hand of God! Notice their comment in verse 5 about the food. Drastic measures were necessary. They were in desperate need of an attitude adjustment. God's hand was all over every aspect of their needs. He was present among them and they behaved as if he wasn't there providing for them, and what they did recognize as being provided by him they complained about.

God used poisonous snakes (commonly found throughout Egypt and Sinai) to discipline and test the Israelites, drawing their attention back to him. By looking upon the bronze snake the Israelites were healed, not by faith in the snake but by faith in God. (See verses 7-8.) The sign itself did not heal; it **drew attention** back to God. Healing and salvation comes from God. This episode foreshadows Christ's healing us of our sins and their eternal consequences. Similarly, our salvation happens when we look upon Jesus in faith that he will save us. Again it is reiterated that salvation comes from God, not by works of man.

For God so Loved the World

Let's return to John chapter 3:16-21. These final verses summarize the Gospel. God's relationship with us is motivated by love. Love not just for one group of people but the whole world. Verse 16 states God's intention and the means by which redemption will be brought about for those who choose to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Through Jesus God the Father is

opening the way for the whole world to come to him. Through Jesus he is able to reach out in love to the whole world offering the world a gift in the sacrifice of his one and only son "*For God so loved the world he gave his one and only Son...*" The Greek word translated **one and only**, referring to the Son, is *monogenē*, which means "only begotten," or "only born-one."⁴ It is a gift beyond measure. We look at our children, grandchildren, children we love and adore and realize the magnitude of what God did in sending his Son to the world. Christian salvation is costly- it cost the life of God's *only* son. Therefore we cannot truly enter the process of salvation unless we recognize the incalculable cost and accept the implications of that cost in our own life.⁵

Verse 17 tells us God's purpose in sending his Son to the world. God is revealing a plan based on love, not punishment and condemnation. He is providing a means by which the world can come to him. God is a caring God. Loving-kindness, or grace (Hebrew, *chesed*), is a primary characteristic of God. In the New Testament God's purpose in sending Jesus was not to condemn but to build the bridge of *reconciling sacrifice*. God's goal always has been the salvation of the world. Scripture will not allow mankind to hold God responsible for mankind's terrible plight. Free choice and sin have invaded God's creation by mankind's introduction. God is reaching out to the whole world. It is each individual's responsibility to accept and believe in God's gift of salvation through his Son.

God sent his son to a world knowing that the majority of the world would refuse to accept and would disdain the gift. God still sent his son knowing that his son would be refused and rejected by his creation. As a result, the rejection of God's love brings judgment or condemnation. The key to salvation is believing in the work of Jesus on the cross. But people who reject that truth – that "light" (here we have that light/dark symbolism illuminating belief and unbelief) have *resigned themselves* to darkness and therefore are already under judgment and condemnation. Like the Israelites who refused to look in faith on God's prescribed remedy held up by Moses, they will die in their sins. Those who put their faith in Christ are no longer under condemnation.

According to the NAC:

"What makes human choice so crucial in this Gospel is the immediate nature of judgment/condemnation. Condemnation is not left to some remote future that might lull the unbeliever into a comfortable feeling that for a while one can sit on the fence of uncommitment. John makes it absolutely clear that condemnation has "already" (*ēdē*) taken place for the unbelievers. The idea here then is not one of a possible projected condemnation for the unbeliever but the *necessity of escaping an already existing condemnation...* The authentic believer thus begins to deal immediately with future realities such as the threat of ultimate death and condemnation. Therefore the believer does not need to fear the death threat (5:24) because the believer's expectation is a resurrection to life (5:29). But the unbeliever, who in the present time is under condemnation (3:17), has in the future only the prospect of a resurrection to condemnation."

⁴ Bible Knowledge Commentary

⁵ NAC

The final verdict of judgment follows in verses 19-21. Light (or truth, the *Logos*) has come into the world but mankind prefers the cover of darkness because his actions and choices are evil, or here the Greek word *ponera* is better translated "wicked". It is not the darkness that he loves as much as the idols and actions he chooses and values ahead of God. In verse 20 the word evil is translated from a different word, *phaula*, meaning worthless. The wicked deeds of verse 19 are worthless deeds and will be revealed as such when brought into the light of God. Think about how this applies to Jesus' encounters with various individuals we have looked at in the last couple of weeks. Jesus' light draws the disciples to him. They do not fear the light that truth sheds in their lives. But look at Herod. Just the mention of messiah drives him to attempt to extinguish that light! Fear of exposure to the light of truth drives Herod, and later the Pharisees, to extinguish that light of truth because they know deep down they don't serve God, they serve themselves. Their own immediate wants and desires of this world are more important to them than serving and obeying God.

The last verse tells us that whoever lives by the truth comes into the light – their deeds are revealed by the light to be of value, rather than "worthless", and that the Spirit dwelling in them is the driving force of their deeds. Their values have been changed to ones that reveal the light of God. Here is the warning: those deeds that reflect or reveal the light of God, the Truth, shine in the same darkness that those who prefer the cover of darkness hide. What we do in the world that reflects and reveals his light is a threat to those who prefer the cover of their darkness. The darkness they covet recedes in the light of truth. Remember the darkness we talked about at the beginning. Darkness symbolizes Nicodemus' lack of knowledge or understanding of the things of God. We know that later Nicodemus' encounter here with the Light of God through Jesus leads him into a better understanding of God and into relationship with him. He comes to believe that Jesus is Lord and Savior. This is not always the result of God's light shining in the darkness. Often that light will be a threat. We can only pray that God's spirit will prepare the way for whatever light we shed in the darkness of encounters with non-believers will have the same result as with Nicodemus. Often it will not. Sometimes it will cause conflict, withdrawal, broken relationships, prejudice, anger, and hurt. Many people don't want their lives exposed to God's light because they are afraid of what will be revealed. They don't want to be changed. Don't be surprised when these same people are threatened by your desire to obey God and do what is right, because they are afraid that the light in you may expose some of the darkness in their lives. Rather than giving in to discouragement, keep praying that they will come to see how much better it is to live in light than in darkness.⁶

⁶ Life Application Bible Notes, Jn 3:19-21