

Moving from Darkness into Light

Jesus and Nicodemus (John 3:1-21)

by Bill Moller (a sermon transcript)

We've all seen them, those John 3:16 posters. In the stands and among the crowds at sporting events and political rallies. Most of us know this verse by heart:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

The verse comes toward the end of the passage that tells us about a meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus. The opening verse notes that Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a member of the Jewish ruling council, who came to Jesus at night. There is a lot of information in that little verse.

What is a Pharisee, you ask? My New Testament professor would say that a Pharisee was a "religio-political" leader. Someone who combined religion and politics. Very pious. Very disciplined. Today we might call them "legalists". They felt that upholding The Law was extremely important - possibly more important than anything else.

So, why would a Pharisee be looking for Jesus, and why at night? To answer that question we need to take a look at the context of this passage - something we should ALWAYS do when studying Scripture.

In chapter two of the Gospel of John we read about two significant events - The Wedding at Cana where Jesus turned water into wine, and the Clearing of the Temple by Jesus, when he overturned the tables of the money changers and drove the dealers out of the Temple Courtyard. But

in addition to John 2, we need to take a quick look at John 21:25, where we learn that Jesus did many other things that were not documented in the Bible. So, I think we can assume that in addition to these two events noted in chapter two, there were probably other miraculous signs and maybe other tumultuous events as well.

Imagine, if you will, a group of religio-political leaders gathering each day at the Temple in Jerusalem. They have heard reports of a Rabbi from Nazareth who was performing miraculous signs - water into wine - and selecting "disciples" who were leaving their homes and businesses to follow him. Then suddenly this Rabbi (Jesus) shows up in the Temple courtyard, pulls out a whip, and begins disrupting everything - on their home turf.



A pious leader, dressed in his fancy robes would probably not confront the invader in the middle of the turmoil. I imagine them cautiously slipping away from the riot and gathering later to discuss the situation. I can also imagine the group deciding to send someone to find out what this Jesus of Nazareth was all about. Nicodemus was probably the guy who drew the short straw.

We know from verse 1 that Nicodemus came at night. I suppose if Nicodemus went looking for Jesus in the daylight, it might have been misconstrued - was he submitting to Jesus' authority? Was he changing his allegiance and becoming a disciple of Jesus? Was he embarrassed to be seen with Jesus? Was he afraid of Jesus? The Scripture doesn't offer a clear explanation. However, coming at night, may also have a

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symbolic meaning. Was Nicodemus IN THE DARK about Jesus.

You've heard of that expression, "in the dark", right? It means you're uninformed, unaware, oblivious. Have you ever been in a completely dark place – so dark you cannot see your hand when you hold it in front of your face? Have you ever tried to communicate with someone else while in a completely dark room? If you tell them to turn right you have to guess which way is the right right – which way are they facing – which way am I facing.

Now imagine Nicodemus coming "at night" to find Jesus. He may be trying to hide his visit, but we might also say, "He's clueless." He has no idea what he's getting into. Oh, sure, he's a Pharisee – he's a leader, he's respected and knowledgeable, but he's also in the dark.



In the first chapter of John's Gospel we read these words in verse 4:

In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood.

This story about Nicodemus is describing exactly what was referenced in John 1.

Now, go back to the dark room we imagined before, but add one thing to the scene. A light – a bright and focused light. Now, because of that light, we begin to see things. What was invisible before – things we didn't know were present – suddenly come into view. Maybe we rub our eyes and strain to focus, but now we see that which we did not see just moments before. The things were there all along, we just couldn't see them. This new light has changed everything.

Nicodemus walks into what is essentially a dark room for him. He kicks into Pharisee mode and begins to politely address Jesus – offering some respectful complements and platitudes. He is aware of Jesus' many miraculous signs (remember what John 21:25 says about all that Jesus did), but he assumes that physical signs – miracles, healings – is all Jesus cares about. There is a light in the dark room, but Nicodemus doesn't know what to do with it. So Jesus decides to take charge, and he cuts Nicodemus to the bone with his reply in verse 3.

"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Jesus is saying "you don't know what you're talking about – you are in the dark – you are judging me by earthly standards – you don't even see what I'm really doing – what's happening in the 'kingdom' sense. You may have been born into this world – into the physical realm, but to really see what the kingdom of God is all

about you have to be born into the spiritual world – you must be 'born again'".

That term "born again" comes from this passage. Some English translations use the words "born anew" or "born from above". Both are legitimate translations of the Greek. Regardless of which term you use, the meaning is clear – what Jesus is saying is, you need some spiritual light to shine in your darkness so you can see what God is doing – what the kingdom is all about. You need to move out of darkness and into the light!

If we jump ahead and look at John chapter 7, we see that Nicodemus must have found some spiritual light. He appears to defend Jesus – when the Jewish leaders express their disbelief that Jesus is the Christ. And, he is mocked for doing so, by the Jewish leaders.

"You mean he has deceived you also?" the Pharisees retorted...

Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, "Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?"

Just one chapter after our Nicodemus story, we read about Jesus and his conversation with a Samaritan woman, but that discussion takes place at the sixth hour (midday). And if you read that passage you don't see posturing and you don't hear platitudes, you see instead that the Samaritan woman becomes the first Christian evangelist – after speaking with Jesus, face to face in the light of day – she runs and tells her whole village – and many people believe.

New birth, being born again, born from above, born anew, can occur in many ways. People can experience a sudden conversion – like a bank of spotlights coming on all at once – after which kingdom reality becomes instantly clear. Others may experience a slower process – more like the illumination of the candles at most Christmas eve services. First there is one light, then a few more, then gradually the room is all aglow. The point is that when we realize that the light of Jesus exists, and we begin pointing that light at all the events in our lives, we start to see things we've never seen before. We begin to understand what being a follower of Christ is all about. We start to seek out more light – we search the Bible, we ask in prayer, we discuss biblical topics with our fellow believers – and our life begins to glow with the light of Jesus.

Jump with me a little further ahead to chapter 19.

Starting at verse 38 we read about the burial of Jesus by Joseph and another man – Nicodemus.

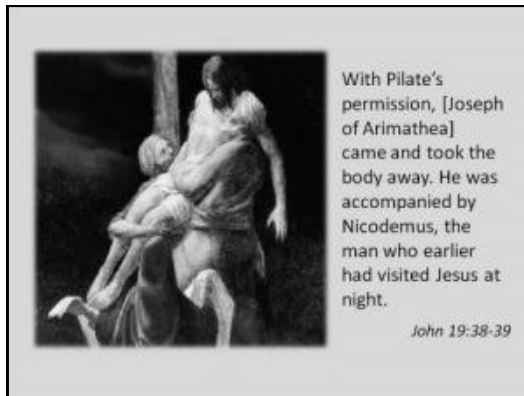
With Pilate's permission, [Joseph of Arimathea] came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night.

Joseph is described as a "secret disciple", but Nicodemus is operating as a believer in full view of Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor. He's not slinking around in the dark any more. He's out in daylight, serving his fallen Lord despite the possible consequences.

Years have passed since Nicodemus approached Jesus at night. It appears that something happened during that span of time. Nicodemus has gone from a doubting Pharisee to a devoted believer. The light of Jesus entered his darkness, and he was no longer the same person. His darkness was wiped away. One might say he was healed of his darkness.

In verse 14 of chapter 3, Jesus reminds Nicodemus of a story about Moses and the Israelites. You can read about this incident in the book of Numbers – chapter 21. The Israelites are grumbling – as usual – and the Lord loses his patience with them

Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.



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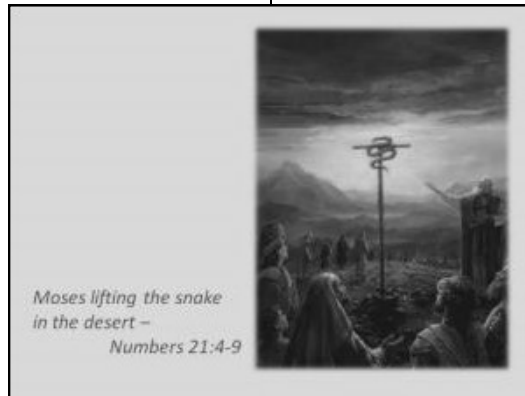
The Lord said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

Here, we learn that many of the people are bitten and die. So the Israelites repented, prayed and ask for relief from this punishment - this darkness. So God says to Moses - okay, here's how we're going to handle this... make a bronze snake and hoist it up on a pole and tell the people that if they look upon this symbol and believe that God will provide relief, they will be healed - their venomous darkness will be cleared away.

At this point Jesus finally addresses Nicodemus' original question from verse 4 - "How can this be?" (How can someone be born again?)

Jesus tells Nicodemus that the Son of Man must be lifted just like Moses lifted the snake in the desert (a veiled prophecy about his crucifixion). He then states that everyone who believes in him may have ETERNAL life. They won't just be healed of snake

bites - their darkness will be wiped away... a new light will enter their existence... they will begin to see what they never saw before... they will be born into the spiritual kingdom of God.



I can only imagine what must have been going through Nicodemus' mind. Just a short time before he was a respected Pharisee, but now he has learned the truth about Jesus - he has the light of Jesus in his life.

I suspect he had to deal with the same issues we experience when we are "born again". How do we go back into the world? Can we continue to live the same old life now that we see things as they really are - as Jesus has shown us?

These are the questions this passage of Scripture raises.

Let's all bow our heads in prayer and thank God for our spiritual rebirth and ask for guidance in this new life - to be moved out of darkness and into the light!

Amen.