

John 3:1-21

Nicodemus Visits Jesus

Who was this Nicodemus? What do we know about him? Impeccable pedigree/credentials! He was a Jew, a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin (the highest legal, legislative, and judicial body of the Jews), and a highly respected teacher of the Old Testament Scriptures. Can you imagine being Nicodemus and having Jesus tell you that all of this is not enough to get you into the kingdom of God? Yet this is precisely what Jesus tells Nicodemus. If a man like Nicodemus is not good enough for the kingdom of God, then who is? That is the question, and Jesus has the answer, which John records for us.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee at the top of his field. Not only is he a member of the Sanhedrin, he is the most renowned Bible teacher of his day—the “Billy Graham” of first century Jerusalem. Yet when he hears Jesus teach, he hears the answers to questions that have bothered him for years. He watches the crowds as they listen to Jesus, and he knows he has never held the attention of an audience like Jesus does. Jesus speaks in simple terms, but His message has great power. Nicodemus observes the miracles Jesus performs, knowing he has never performed even one miracle.

The reason why John records Nicodemus’s conversation with Jesus, is that in spite of his achievements, in spite of his prominence in education, politics, culture, and religion, Nicodemus had a great need. He needed to know God.

Verse 2 When did Nicodemus come to visit Jesus? After dark.

Why at night? Scripture doesn’t tell us. Perhaps Nicodemus feared retribution, losing status, or embarrassment.

What do you think might have been on his mind/purpose? He wondered if Jesus could be the Messiah he’d been waiting for.

The one thing about Jesus that impressed the crowds, irritated the Jewish leaders, and caught Nicodemus’ attention was that Jesus taught and acted with authority. The basic issue for a Pharisee like Nicodemus was the authority issue. *Who gave you the right to.....do, say, etc.* Jesus was usurping the Pharisees’ authority.

When Nicodemus makes an introductory comment, how does Jesus respond? Jesus got right to the bottom line! *You’re on the pathway to hell, Nicodemus! If you want to get to heaven, you must be born again.*

What does it mean to be born again? Spiritually awakening to the truth of who Jesus is. We had a physical birth. Now we need to have a spiritual birth.

How does someone become born again? By recognizing that, in God’s eyes, you are a sinner. By placing your faith in Jesus alone for the forgiveness of your sins and trusting in Him alone to get to heaven. Entering into a right relationship with God. Surrendering your life, career, family, bank account, and everything else to the control of Jesus. Allowing Him to make you into the person He wants you to be.

Application: Are you in a right relationship with Jesus now? Based on what?

Verse 5 What does “born of water and the spirit” mean? Some take the term “water” to refer to natural birth, while they believe “spirit” refers to one’s spiritual re-birth from above. If this is what our Lord intended, then He would be saying that a man must first be born naturally (“of water”) and then supernaturally (“of the Spirit”).

Others understand “water and spirit” together as referring to spiritual rebirth. It points to water baptism. This encounter happened before Christian baptism was initiated, so all that Nicodemus knew was the Jewish system of baptism. Christian baptism is designed to identify us with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection.

No matter what the water means, the Spirit is the key. The second birth is the issue at stake.

What was the Jews’ attitude toward their salvation? To many Jews, to be born a Jew was the equivalent of being born into the kingdom of God. Imagine the shocked look on the face of Nicodemus when Jesus tells him that his natural birth (as a Jew) will not save him, and that he must be reborn from above. The implication is clear: Unless Nicodemus is reborn from above, he will not see the kingdom of God. Here is a man who thinks he has reserved seats on the 50-yard line of heaven—and Jesus tells him that he is not even going to get into heaven as he is. He first must be born again, from above.

Note: The Jews were so certain they were going to heaven simply because they were born Jewish that some Rabbis taught that Abraham stood watch at the gates of hell, just to make sure that none of his descendants accidentally wandered in there.

Application: There is a big difference between being religious and being a Christian. One could not get much more religious than Nicodemus, but our Lord's words make it clear that as "religious" as he is, Nicodemus is not yet a Christian. Spiritually speaking, Nicodemus is a condemned man who must be reborn from above. How do religion and being a Christian differ in your life?

Verse 8 What is Jesus' point as he compares the Holy Spirit with the wind? Jesus likens the saving work of God through His Spirit to the working of the wind. The effects of the wind can be seen, but the wind itself is not seen. The wind goes where it wishes and does what it will. Men do not control the wind. Jesus used the wind to illustrate the birth of the Spirit. Jesus wanted Nicodemus to know that he didn't have to understand everything about the new birth before he experienced it.

No one, by his own works, or striving, or manipulation can direct the Spirit in His work. But when the Spirit brings about the new birth, the effects are evident. We know it is the work of God's Spirit, unseen and beyond man's control. In this sense, neither Nicodemus nor anyone else can save themselves. Salvation is the sovereign work of God, accomplished by the Holy Spirit.

Application: Nicodemus came to Jesus—but none of the other Pharisees did. He was an inquisitive seeker much like most of us when we were first exposed to Christianity and we were trying to determine exactly who Jesus is and how He might impact our lives. Look at John 6:44, 65 and discuss what is happening.

Jesus had barely begun His ministry but according to v. 14-15, what did He already know about His mission? He knew how it would end—being lifted on a cross—and He knew the purpose for which He was going to die.

Why did Jesus include the story of the bronze serpent? Nicodemus, a learned teacher of the Scriptures would be very familiar with the story of the bronze serpent. This illustration of Jesus being lifted up would be shockingly clear to Nicodemus.

The story of the bronze serpent, recorded in Numbers 21, foreshadows the cross and the salvation which God will provide through the "Son of Man." As the serpent was lifted up, those who looked to the bronze serpent were saved from the death they deserved. So the Son of Man must be "lifted up," so that all those who "look up" to Jesus in faith, trusting in Him to remove the judgment for their sin, like the Israelites of old, will be saved from God's wrath.

What do verses 16-18 reveal:

- **About God the Father?** He loves us and is in control. These verses give us a picture of the greatest love and the greatest gift
- **About Jesus the Son?** His job is to save—not condemn—the world. He is the one and only Son of God.
- **About man?** Man's job is to believe in Jesus.
- **About how to get to heaven?** Three times in vs. 15-18, building on the theme of being born again, John is very clear that believing in Jesus is the key to eternal life.

For a Pharisee like Nicodemus, what would be the most shocking part of verse 16? This verse declares that God's love extends to *the world*, and that God has purposed to save Gentiles as well as Jews. This was literally beyond the comprehension of many Jews. "Whoever" is repeated three times. There are no limitations based on race, nationality, gender, denomination, social standing, etc.

What does Jesus state in verse 18 as the reason that people are condemned? Unbelief in Jesus.

Application: There is a danger in leaving familiar passages of Scripture before we let them impact our lives. Take a minute and read verses 19-21 inserting your own name: "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but ____ loved darkness instead of light because ____'s deeds were evil. When ____ does evil ____ hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that ____'s deeds will be exposed. But whenever ____ lives by the truth, ____ comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what ____ has done has been done through God." How does that help this passage of Scripture come alive for you?

MEMORIZE: John 3:17