

The Journey... Walk as Jesus Walked

Part 12 – Nicodemus... Following from a Distance

John 3:1-17 – March 14, 2010

Have you ever secretly admired someone, but didn't want to come out with it publically? Or maybe you are questioning your beliefs, but you want to ask questions, without being made to feel stupid? Exploring faith when you are in the discovery process can be risky, but it is equally rewarding. We find Jesus interacting with Nicodemus and in the process we get answers to the questions: How does someone get saved? What is the process of salvation?

I. The Essence of Salvation... Nicodemus a **secret convert**?

A. The credentials of Nicodemus (v. 1)

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

1. **Pharisee** (or separated one). They were also known as the chaburah or brotherhood. There were only 6000 of them at any given time. They had separated themselves from ordinary life in order to keep every detail of the law of the scribes. Note: the Scribes worked out the details regulations, and the Pharisees were dedicated to keeping them! They would take a pledge in front of 3 witnesses that they would “spend all their lives every observing every detail of the scribal law”. His name is a Greek name meaning "victory of the people" or "victorious people." Compare Phil. 3:4-6 of Paul's experience.
2. **Ruler** (*archon*) *of the Jews*: He is also a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin. These 70 members acted as the supreme court of the Jews, focusing on the religious life of every Jew in the known world! One of their duties was to examine anyone who was suspected of being a false prophet. **Question: Who is the chief bible teacher of our day?**

3. **Wealthy** (John 19:39 – only a wealthy man could have brought 100 pounds of spices). He could have been from a very prominent Jewish family. What a contrast between the Jewish aristocrat and the homeless, peasant carpenter and prophet.

B. The confession of Nicodemus (v. 2)

²this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.

1. **By night:** There are 2 reasons.

- This was sign of caution. He didn’t want to risk his standing with other Jewish leaders... who were still mad at Him for what He had done in the temple! It is a wonder that he came at all; better at night than not at all. **App: Do we make it hard for people to come to Jesus?**
- The rabbis had declared that night was the best time to study the law, because of fewer distractions, when they would be undisturbed. With all the crowds, Nick wanted to come and have an absolutely private conversation.
- **Night** is used symbolically of the spiritual darkness that surrounded him, in spite of the supposed light he thought he had as a religious leader.

2. **Rabbi:** Even though he himself was a respected teacher in his own right, Nick refers to Jesus in a collegial way... especially since he had no rabbinic training and was much younger than this elder statesman. Is it possible that Nicodemus was present when Jesus first at the temple as a 12 year old? **We know that ultimately Jesus is more than just a teacher!**

3. **We:** He may have brought other “secret” followers with him, or he at least represents them

4. The *signs* Nicodemus are referring to (see 2:23-25) could indicate that Nicodemus was one of the “believers” Jesus didn’t trust. Or the “now” indicates in contrast with those previously mentioned, he is actually trying figure this all out! He at least acknowledges that Jesus is from God because of his miracles.
5. *No one can do... God is with:* It was customary in Jewish culture to start with praise before stating one’s cause. The most natural reading of 3:1-15 is that at this point Nicodemus, though interested, is not particularly open to the truth yet eventually he comes around to side with Jesus.

C. The command to Nicodemus (v. 3)

³Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

1. Truly, Truly: Amen (AMHN) 25x in the gospel of John.
2. Though he doesn’t actually ask a question, Nick implies one. Who are you really? Are you the Messiah? I know you are someone special, but exactly who are you?
3. *Born again:* Jesus says he needs the new birth. He is setting the stage to explain salvation. Jesus is saying that signs and wonders aren’t all that important. What is important is a belief that transforms your life. It is like starting over!
4. *Again:* (“anew”) can have several meanings - which is precisely why John used the word. It can mean “from the beginning,” or “again” in the sense of “for a second time,” or “from above.”
5. If Nicodemus, with his knowledge, gifts, understanding, position and integrity, cannot enter the promised kingdom by virtue of his standing and works, what hope is there for anyone who seeks salvation along such lines?

D. The confusion of Nicodemus (v. 4)

⁴Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"

1. One of the characteristics of John's gospel is Jesus responding to inadequate understanding with a puzzling statement. That puzzling statement then becomes the springboard for further teaching.
2. He confuses spiritual birth with physical birth. Nick misunderstood because he is thinking in purely physical terms, not spiritual. He confuses childbirth with a spiritual rebirth.

E. The clarification for Nicodemus (v. 5-8)

⁵Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." ⁶"That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." ⁷Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸"The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Jesus employs two illustrations to explain the new birth to Nicodemus.

1. A **physical/biological** illustration (v. 5-7)
2. *Born of water and the Spirit*: This refers to the spiritual cleansing at salvation not a reference to water baptism as necessary for salvation. The closest OT parallel is Ezek. 36:25-27, God's cleansing of human hearts with water and their inner transformation by his Spirit (see also Isa. 44:3-5).
3. *Kingdom*: 3:3, 5 and 18:36 are the only times the word kingdom is used in John's gospel, though used prominently in the Synoptics.
4. A **nature** illustration (v. 8)
 - Jesus said that the Holy Spirit is like the wind. Even though we can't "see" the wind, we feel its effects. We can't see the HS, but we see its effects!

- Actually, the words for ‘wind’ and ‘spirit’ are the same in both Hebrew and Greek. Like the wind, the Holy Spirit is invisible (something that we cannot see, although it is there). Like the wind, the Holy Spirit can go anywhere and everywhere. Like the wind, we can feel the effects of the Holy Spirit. And like the wind, we cannot control the Holy Spirit.
- We cannot explain how the Holy Spirit gives to us this new birth. It is a mystery. We can never really understand it. We just know that it is true. It happens!

II. The Explanation of Salvation (v. 9-15)... Nicodemus a subtle critic?

A. The chiding of Nicodemus (v. 9-10)

⁹Nicodemus said to Him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?”

1. Jesus chides him for not knowing these things even though he is a respected Jewish teacher. He doesn’t cut him any slack! Is he mocking him???
2. *The teacher*: He may have been the teacher... possibly in the same league as Gamaliel. Notice: Nick’s questions get shorter and Jesus’ answers get longer.

B. The critique of Nicodemus (v. 11-13)

¹¹“Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. ¹²“If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³“No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man.

1. Jesus used the plural ‘we’ in verse 11. Some people think that He was referring to the disciples. But the disciples had known Jesus only for a short time. So perhaps Jesus was including God the Father and the Holy Spirit with Himself.
2. *Earthly things*: Jesus challenges the assumption that miracles alone will bring someone to “belief”.

3. *Do not believe*: The evidence for God is consistent (Rom. 1) and yet people still choose to reject Him!
 4. *Descended*: Lays the foundation for the kenosis and incarnation that Paul will write about in Philippians.
- C. The comparison with Moses' serpent (v. 14-15)

¹⁴“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; ¹⁵so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

1. This refers to an incident in the Old Testament (Numbers 21:8-9). The Israelites were wandering in the desert. They had complained about God. So He sent many snakes to punish them for their bad attitude. The snakes bit and killed many people. Then God told Moses to make a metal snake (bronze serpent). He told Moses to put it on the top of a pole. When the snakes bit the people, the people had to look up at the metal snake. If they did this, they would not die.
2. Sin is like a snake's bite. A bite poisons our bodies and sin ruins our lives. But God has provided a way save us from sin and death. Jesus said that people would lift Him up and was referring to the time when they would lift Him up on the cross for everyone to see.
3. We must look up at him on the cross and trust Him, because of what He did on the cross. We must believe that He will save us from sin and death. For the Israelites, the only way to cure the snake's bite was to look at the bronze serpent. And the only way to free us from the results of our sin is to look at Jesus on the cross. When we look at the cross, God rescues us from the results of our sins. He died so that God would forgive us. There, at the cross, Jesus took away our sin.
4. Jewish tradition was clear that the healing of Israel did not happen because people looked at the bronze serpent. Rather they understood that the act of lifting up the serpent lifted the attention of Israel above themselves and ultimately to God. It was their focus on God that healed

them. John sees Jesus lifted up to raise the focus of mankind above themselves and to God, the Father of Jesus. Healing will come out of that focus on God.

5. *Lifted up*: One of John's patterns is to combine two aspects of Jesus into one word.
 - He uses "*lifted up*" to describe both the death of Jesus on the cross and the resurrection and glorification of Jesus.
 - The word "lifted up" also means "exalted" and is used in the rest of the NT for Jesus being exalted to the right hand of the Father after His resurrection.

III. The Example of Salvation... Nicodemus' a spiritual **convert**?

- A. He took a **risk**... he overcame **fear**. He explored Jesus' claims at great personal cost. Initially he took a risk to explore the claims regarding Jesus... even though it went against his previously held beliefs. **What risks are you willing to take for Jesus? What are you afraid of?**
- B. He **defended** Jesus... he overcame **disbelief**. The next time we see Nicodemus, he associates himself with Jesus in front of a group of Pharisees by defending Jesus before the ruling council of Pharisees, for which he is mocked. Although we do not know if he has yet accepted Christ at this point, the contrast between visiting Christ in the night, so he will not be noticed, and defending him before his fellow Pharisees cannot be ignored (**John 7:41-52**). **Have you defended your faith recently? When? How?**
- C. He **honors** Jesus... he overcomes **doubt**: The final time Nicodemus is mentioned, he is at Jesus' crucifixion and, with Joseph of Arimathea, takes Jesus' body and after anointing him with oil, wraps and buries him (**John 19:38-42**). John is the only disciple present at Jesus' crucifixion (in John's gospel none of the other disciples are mentioned. They seemingly all abandoned Jesus in his moment of need. Therefore, it makes it all the more significant that Nicodemus is there, associating himself with Christ before, essentially, the world. His

increasing boldness for Christ should serve as an example to all. [How do you honor Jesus?](#) [Do you have any doubts?](#)

IV. The Experience of Salvation (v. 16-17)

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. ¹⁷“For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.

A. The persons (v. 16)

1. The Father gave His Son (v. 16a).
2. The Son will give His life (v. 16b).

B. The purpose (v. 17)

1. It is not to condemn sinners (v. 17a).
2. It is to convert sinners (v. 17b).

C. The Greatest Love Story Ever Told (John 3:16)

1. *For God:* **The greatest being**
2. *So loved:* **The greatest act**
3. *The world:* **The greatest company**
4. *That He gave:* **The greatest demonstration**
5. *His only begotten Son:* **The greatest sacrifice**
6. *That whosoever:* **The greatest offer**
7. *Believes in Him:* **The greatest simplicity**
8. *Should not perish:* **The greatest loss**
9. *But have:* **The greatest certainty**
10. *Eternal life:* **The greatest possession**

D. Dr. J. Edwin Hartill (Bible Teacher at Northwestern) had just gotten done speaking at the FCA Banquet in MN in 1981 and after sharing the “Greatest Love Story Ever Told”, sat down at his table and died of heart attack. Jeff Siemen (Former Viking All-Pro) had been in a plane crash the week before where the

pilot had died and he walked away with just a broken arm. In light of the events of tonight, are you ready to meet Jesus? Life is short!

Table Talk:

1. If you had been in Nicodemus' shoes, would you have explored the truth claims of Jesus? What might have kept you from Him?
2. Why does Jesus use puzzling statements in answer to spiritual questions?
3. How would you use John 3:16-17 to share your faith? What other verses would you use?

Sneak Peak:

1. Read John 4:1-42. This is the story of the woman at the well. Why was talking to a Samaritan woman, such a big deal?
2. How is His conversation similar or different from His conversation with Nicodemus?
3. What does this passage teach us about evangelism?

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