

Discovering Nicodemus

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By Tom and Alberta Ecker

Scriptural References all in NASB

The story of Nicodemus is not like some of the familiar stories we know of men in the Old Testament. Those Old Testament stories for the most part cover the life time of the personalities mentioned, this is not the case for Nicodemus; he is introduced through only a few verses in the New Testament. Yet those few verses cover a full and rich lifetime of history about Nicodemus. His story begins at night as he comes to the place where Jesus is spending the night with his disciples.

Let's begin by understanding who Nicodemus was and the position he held in the community and in Judaism. As we observe his conversation with Jesus let's first unfold three outstanding qualifications that made Nicodemus one of the most impressive figures of his day.

John 3:1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews;

Qualification #1 "a man of the Pharisees"

If there was a position that a man could attain in Judaism that would be equivalent to that of the "Pope" or the "Archbishop of Canterbury" ... Nicodemus would be an Ideal candidate. Unlike the high priest who was born into his position as the high priest, Nicodemus had to be the smartest theological mind in the country. On matters of religion, he was probably a consultant to the high priest. He was one of the most impressively religious men alive at that time, and for many solid reasons. The ordinary Jew would not have known him in any other way except as an impressively religious man.

There is even more to say about Nicodemus, to say that he "**was a man of the Pharisees**" (v. 1) meant that he had great prestige and power in Israel and in Judaism. Nicodemus was among the group of men who for nearly 600 years clung to the Law of Moses as a means of preserving their identity as Children of Abraham and therefore inheritors of the covenant and the promises of God. The root of their beginning was based on a deep devotion to God and a determination to preserve their national identity. The Pharisees had become, over the centuries, a very tight-knit brotherhood. But by the time that Nicodemus sat in that room with Jesus, the admirable loyalty, the nationalism and devotion to the law that the Pharisees clung to had taken on a life of its own. So, not only is Nicodemus

impressively religious and prestigious, he also holds a position of power as a Pharisee.

The Pharisees were meticulous expositors of Old Testament Scriptures and they worked tirelessly to put into effect general principles of the law to apply to everyday life. We know from our own experience that this kind of thinking will take on a life of its own. The Pharisaic rabbis had long lists of prohibitions which had been added to the Law of Moses over the centuries. These oral traditions of the Pharisees were preserved in a document called the Mishnah, which itself contains twenty-four chapters just on how to keep the Sabbath. Makes one wonder about what they did with each of the other nine commandments.

As Chuck Swindoll humorously says, "No one rivaled the Pharisees in being religious. No one could!" This man named Nicodemus was also **"A ruler of the Jews" (v. 1).**

Qualification #2 "a ruler of the Jews" (v. 1)

Knowing the history of Israel and Judah, we know that after the exile to Babylon there was no king who ruled over Judah or Israel in the Promised Land. By the time of Jesus, the Jews had been subject to foreign rulers and governors for centuries. After their return from Babylon they looked to the high priest for leadership. By the first century, when Rome dominated Israel, the high priest presided over a council of seventy experienced statesmen and notable religious figures. This ruling council of elders, called the "Sanhedrin," served as Israel's Parliament or Congress and Supreme Court. We find Nicodemus being counted as one of the number of seventy (the Sanhedrin) in **John 7:46-53:**

*46 The officers answered, "Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks." 47 The Pharisees then answered them, "You have not also been led astray, have you? 48 "No one of the rulers or Pharisees has believed in Him, has he? 49 "But this crowd which does not know the Law is accursed." 50 Nicodemus (**he who came to Him before, being one of them**) said to them, 51 "Our Law does not judge a man unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing, does it?" 52 They answered him, "You are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and see that no prophet arises out of Galilee." 53 Everyone went to his home.*

Are we beginning to get a better picture of Nicodemus? This man who showed up on Jesus' doorstep that night was a combination of The Secretary of State, The Speaker of the House, and The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. We need to remember that Israel was an occupied nation and yet they were free to practice their religion. Israel needed experienced

statesmen who had the credentials to meet with, council with and negotiate with the current governor sent by Rome to rule over that part of the Roman Empire. These men on the council of seventy, which included Nicodemus, were well versed in the art of diplomacy and negotiations.

This council of seventy also ruled over all the religious men and rabbis and synagogues in the nation, and those scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Remember Saul, another religiously impressive man, and a Pharisee, needed permission from the Pharisees in Jerusalem to arrest Christians in Damascus. So we understand a bit more that this dignified man, Nicodemus, was not only a ruler in the nation he was a ruler over other religious men.

John 3:10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?"

Qualification #3 "The teacher of Israel" (v. 10)

We would be impressed beyond words to have such a man come to our home. Jesus greeted and treated Nicodemus with the honor that was his due while realizing that Nicodemus was there to be taught and not to teach. The conversation would take an unexpected turn for Nicodemus, "The teacher of Israel." Jesus will burst his bubble, so to speak, and Nicodemus would learn about a teaching that changes the whole life and history of the person who listens and believes what Nicodemus heard from the mouth of the Lord.

Let's go on to explain the meaning of this phrase "The teacher of Israel." John's account of this meeting is written in Greek; however, it reflects the Lord's use of the definite article in Aramaic. (Remember, the everyday language of the Jews was Aramaic, so Jesus and Nicodemus spoke in Aramaic). The Lord's ***use of this definite article*** "the" in verse 10 would come across in our vernacular as "Thee." Jesus' phrase would state the fact that Nicodemus was by reputation regarded as the preeminent voice of religious teaching, and yet, ironically, he was there struggling with Jesus' clear teaching on being 'born again.' Jesus meant no disrespect to Nicodemus, because he knew this was no common Jew sitting in front of Him, this was a remarkable astute theological mind. And Jesus saw through him with supernatural, spiritual, X-ray vision.

Nicodemus was probably sent there by his peers. Previous confrontations between the Pharisees and Jesus in the temple had proven to be embarrassing. His peers would have sent someone like Nicodemus, a man with great counseling skills and great religious understanding. Given his reputation and high position Nicodemus probably came in all sincerity to

investigate this popular and controversial rabbi from Galilee, perhaps even in the spirit of professional courtesy and even personal curiosity.

John 3:2-3 this 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." 3 Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

There could have been more said here in the opening conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. The opening lines spoken by Nicodemus show all the grace and dignity of a man on a diplomatic mission. But Jesus bypassed the flattering approach and cut straight to the heart of the matter. Jesus knew that the man sitting before him was a remarkably astute theological mind, so he presented the teacher of Israel a fresh theological understanding, using fresh terminology. This is the first instance of the phrase "born again," not a concept then familiar to scholars of the Hebrew Scriptures. John foreshadowed this concept in his prologue:

John 1:12-13 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God

For the thoughtful person reading the Gospel of John there is already the beginning concept of a kind of new birth, namely, children who are born by the will of God. The Greek word *anōthen*, translated in 3:3 as "**again**," can have several meanings, but the most common rendering is "from above," similar to our expression that a person has "received help from above" – meaning that God helped him or her.

Jesus made this different kind of birth a requirement for citizenship in the "kingdom of God." As a politician, Nicodemus cared only about Israel as God's kingdom here on earth, which had been reduced to a province of Rome. He was looking for a Messiah that would restore the fortunes of Israel and set it free from Rome. So Jesus' words caught his attention and his demeanor shifted dramatically as he dropped his flattering façade and engaged Jesus in thoughtful debate. Now Nicodemus took off his diplomat's hat and put on his theological hat.

John 3:4-5 Nicodemus 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?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless

one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

When Nicodemus heard the new requirement for citizenship in the kingdom of God as being that one "must be born *anōthen*," he deliberately focused on the "***again***" nuance of the phrase. Perhaps with tongue in cheek he stretched the image out of shape. Remember he is a brilliant theologian, skilled in the art of debate, addressing a person he undoubtedly saw as a young upstart. His stretched out image said in effect, "What a ludicrous concept!"

Nicodemus was not unfamiliar with the concept of becoming a newborn child, because the Jews in his day called Gentile converts to Judaism "newborn children." What he balked at was the concept that anyone and everyone must be "born again" to be a citizen of the kingdom of God. He just could not believe that he as a descendant of Abraham would not automatically be a citizen of the kingdom of God. So he wanted to side step his prejudice by turning what Jesus said into an image that he could stretch out of shape and make Jesus look ridiculous. But Jesus, being a perfect theologian and full of grace and truth, saw that Nicodemus was earth bound and therefore limited in his thinking. Jesus then goes right to concepts that would have been familiar to Nicodemus.

Everyone in Jerusalem, including this famous teacher, knew of the ministry of John the Baptizer. John had called Jews to a "baptism of repentance," in which Jews were to come to God in sincere repentance as if for the first time. Nicodemus knew all about John the Baptist's ministry. So when Jesus had already said in ***John 3:3 "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God"*** Nicodemus was not connecting Jesus words to any kind of baptism at this point.

But now after stretching Jesus' words out of shape with a physical picture, Jesus connects being "born again" to water and the Spirit. ***John 3:4*** Nicodemus understood water baptism and he knew of the promise of the Spirit from the Old Testament scriptures. He knew about John's baptism, but now Jesus was going to make a connection between himself and a baptism of water and the Spirit. This baptism of Jesus would be a baptism of actual life – abundant life, spiritual life, life made possible only through the Holy Spirit, which he would send from the Father. Connecting the concepts "born *anōthen*" and born of water and the Spirit" should have sparked the rabbi's memory of a familiar Old Testament promise:

Ezekiel 36:24-28 "For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land 25 "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be

clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 "Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh 27 "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. 28 "You will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God.

Unless one is born "from above" through the cleansing work of the Spirit of God within, he or she cannot enter God's kingdom. He or she cannot understand the new life that a Christian lives in the Spirit as a citizen of the kingdom of God.

John 3:6-8 "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 "Do 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 illustration of "water and the Spirit" reveals the difference between living in the flesh and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. Flesh begets flesh, Spirit begets spirit. Spiritual life is a mystery to the physical realm. It cannot be obtained through physical means. The Spirit of God, the source of all spiritual life, cannot be impressed by the flesh. He cannot be tricked, or bribed, or flattered, or deceived by the flesh. The Spirit leads and directs us in paths that we don't always see, but we can trust Him to know that where He leads is what is best for us.

John 3:9-13 Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? 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.

We need to give Nicodemus credit for hearing Jesus fully as he explained the new concept of being born again. While many of his fellow Pharisees rejected Jesus outright, he tried to understand Jesus' message and wrestle with his own issues about Jesus' identity. The self-assured statesman became a stammering student. On the surface he appeared to not

understand, but Jesus dug deeper to help him see the real source of his struggle. Note the progression of Jesus' words:

"You do not **understand**..." (v. 10) singular

"You do not **accept**..." (v. 11) plural – all those he represented did not accept.

"how will you **believe**?" (v. 12) plural – all those he represented did not believe.

First, Jesus knew that these spiritual matters were foreign to the mind of Israel's leading spiritual teacher. If the blind lead the blind they will all fall in the ditch.

Second, the real struggle for Nicodemus and the people he represented (the plural referrals) was their refusal to accept and believe the testimony of John the Baptist about Jesus, the testimony of the many miracles performed by Jesus and the testimony of Jesus' own preaching and teaching.

Third, Jesus acknowledged that spiritual realities are more difficult to believe; nevertheless, the heart of the matter is credibility. Whom are you going to trust?

Finally, Jesus claimed to be an eyewitness to heavenly truths. While a mere human being cannot physically ascend to heaven to witness spiritual realities, God can descend physically to testify to humanity. Not only can God come to earth as a man, He did come to earth as a man. Jesus often referred to himself as the Son of Man, an Old Testament idiom familiar to Nicodemus, which carried with it overtones of the promised Messiah.

John 3:14-15 "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; 15 so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life."

Jesus draws on a familiar episode in Israel's history (found in **Num. 21:4-9**) to illustrate how regeneration takes place. We're all familiar with this story. Israel was brought out of Egyptian bondage through great and miraculous displays of God's sovereign power. Yet here they are in the desert grumbling and complaining. After much patient forbearance God decides to discipline His disbelieving, disobedient people with an affliction in the form of venomous snakes. The people are terrified and begin to die so Moses intercedes for them. In response the Lord instructs him to fashion a bronze snake and put it on a pole and when the people looked up at the bronze snake, the venom would lose its effectiveness.

Jesus used this story to illustrate to Nicodemus that just as the venom lost its effectiveness in the person who looked upon the bronze snake, so will sin and death lose its effectiveness in the one who looks upon the cross and believes in Jesus, the person who believes and obeys will in Him have eternal life. Regeneration, the gift of eternal life occurs through belief and obedience.

Nicodemus' story is told in **John 3:1-21, 7:50-52, 19:39-40**. In conclusion, let's consider what we can learn from the ***Life Application Bible*** on the subject of Nicodemus.

His strengths and accomplishments:

*One of the few religious leaders who believed in Jesus
A member of the powerful Jewish council
A Pharisee who was attracted by Jesus' character and miracles
Joined with Joseph of Arimathea in burying Jesus*

Weakness and mistake:

Limited by his fear of being publicly exposed as Jesus' follower

Lessons from his life:

*Unless we are born again, we can never be part of the kingdom of God
God is able to change those we might consider unreachable
God is patient, but persistent
If we are available, God can use us*

***Information for the sermon based on
"Insights on John" by Charles R. Swindoll, 2010***