

Lesson 7

John 3: Nicodemus

The Timid Inquirer of Jesus

Introduction

Nicodemus was an influential Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. Only mentioned in John's gospel, he was very interested in Jesus. It is thought that he later became a believer. He is a puzzling figure. He appears in John 3 seemingly ready to believe but winds up in silence at Jesus' response, 3.1-21. Later he defended Jesus before the Pharisees, only to receive a pointed rebuke, John 7.45-52. Finally, he appears at Jesus' tomb, bringing a large quantity of burial spices, 19.38-42.

Who was the man?

Nicodemus' name meant *Victor over the people*. It was a Greek name. Nothing is known with certainty about his family or background. It is likely he came from an aristocratic, wealthy family.

Some have tried to link him to a person mentioned in the Talmud: Nicodemus be Gorion. This person was a wealthy first-century member of the Sanhedrin who, later in life, lost his fortune and his status. In his younger years he was said to be one of the three richest men in Jerusalem. After he lost his fortune, he and his daughter were seen gathering barleycorn for food from under the horses' feet.³ Some believe this person's losses were tied to his possible conversion to Christianity.⁴ This explanation was very popular in the early 20th century, but support for it has waned as the 21st century approached.⁵ Others have tried to link Nicodemus with the rich young ruler (Mark 10.17-22) and still others make the case that he is the author of the gospel of John. All these theories fall far short of any compelling proof.

John 3: Nicodemus' Encounter with Jesus

John 3.1 describes the man as a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews. In John 3.10 Jesus calls Nicodemus *the teacher of Israel*.⁶ He is intelligent and bright. He is very successful. He had it all. In the Jewish religion, Nicodemus could advance no farther. But yet it appears he is worried, doubtful, and lacking in assurance. Spiritually he has reached a very scary place. He has done everything he knows to do yet he still feels like he doesn't know God and he has nowhere to go because he has gone as far as he can.

The Pharisees

The Pharisees were devout Jews and very conscientious of keeping the Law. Their dedication to law keeping not only included everything revealed in Scripture, but also their own law, which they had

³ Unger, Merrill Frederick, R. K. Harrison, Howard Frederic Vos, Cyril J. Barber, and Merrill Frederick Unger. *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1988.

⁴ Seely, Kelly Adair. "Nicodemus." *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016.

⁵ Bassler, Jouette M. "Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108 (1989), p. 635.

⁶ According to the ESV, NASB95 and NASB20.

designed themselves. Their own laws were thought to lead them into deeper holiness. “Pharisee” comes from a word that means to be *separated*. They were isolationists. They wanted nothing to do with the people, because they viewed the common people to be ignorant and cursed. They did not see themselves as ministers to the people … they withheld themselves from the people. So, as a Pharisee, Nicodemus would have been extremely zealous for the law, embraced Jewish traditions, and hypersensitive about keeping every Jewish law and ritual.

The Sanhedrin

This was the highest council of the Jews during the first century. It consisted of 71 members and was presided over by the high priest. It has been suggested that this body was composed of “principal priests, the rich lay nobility, the great landowners and heads of clans.”⁷ While it included both main Jewish parties, it appears the Sadducees dominated. A few leading members of the Pharisees were also members. Its authority was under the authority of the Romans, who allowed it to function and operate to govern and manage Jewish legal matters pertaining to religion and culture.

The New Testament casts two members of the Sanhedrin in a favorable light: Joseph of Arimathea (John 19.38) and Gamaliel (Acts 5.34-39; 22.3). The Sanhedrin put Jesus on trial (Luke 22.66) and harassed the early church in the days leading up to Saul’s persecution (Acts 3-7).

Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the middle of the night

John 3.2 says he came to Jesus. It’s impressive because it would not have been common for someone in his position to be that interested in who Jesus was. He was very impressed with the signs Jesus worked: *we know you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform these signs you do unless God were with him.* It is clear he wants to know more about Jesus.

Many commentators look down on him for coming to Jesus at night, but this might not be so much because of any fear he had, but rather he may have been acting out of prudence. He was a very prominent person and would not have wanted to commit to an “unofficial”⁸ teacher from Galilee until he had more information. It is important to note that nowhere in the text does Jesus condemn him for coming at night. Perhaps Nicodemus decided to come at night so he would have more time with Jesus without the crowds present. The desire for uninterrupted communication seems very likely.

Nicodemus comes with kind words for Jesus. He calls Him “Rabbi,” and says Jesus is a person “who has come from God.” He does not yet see Jesus as the Messiah. It appears he approaches as one teacher coming to another … discussing matters they both would have had an interest in. It is also important to see how these pleasantries stand in contrast to what would have been the prevailing view of Jesus being an uneducated *ignorant* person out of what we would commonly refer to as a *blue-collar* background.

⁷ Mangum, Douglas, and Vasile Babota. “Sanhedrin.” *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016.

⁸ Morris, Leon. *The Gospel according to John*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995, p. 186.

Most would have expected Jesus not to have a detailed understanding of theology. If Nicodemus came with this view in mind, he would have been shocked after conversating with Jesus.

It seems likely that Nicodemus comes to Jesus with an open and honest heart ... making a true inquiry. It doesn't appear he comes for the desire for conflict. His faith, although present on a very basic level, will be shown by Jesus to be inadequate. Jesus will show him of his need to take things to the next level, namely *the new birth*.

Jesus' Response

It appears Jesus pays little attention to the pleasantries extended in verse 2. Instead, he goes to the heart of the matter, addressing probably what was on Nicodemus' mind. Whereas Nicodemus approached Jesus as a representative of a group (*we know you are a teacher...*, 3.2), Jesus deals head on with Nicodemus, addressing him alone (*Truly, I tell you...*, 3.3a).

Unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God, 3.3b.

“Seeing” the kingdom is synonymous with entering the kingdom. This would have been an immediate challenge to Nicodemus’ thinking because the Jews believed that all of them (except those who rejected God) would enter the heaven because they were born Jews. Jesus’ statement would have immediately had his attention. Children of God are those who have been born from above.

Nicodemus Replies

“How can anyone be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked him. “Can he enter his mother’s womb a second time and be born,” John 3.4.

Nicodemus is thinking on a literal plane. It is obvious he is yet to understand the nature of regeneration. He is totally confused, especially coming from a background with such a heavy emphasis on human works and devotion being key to salvation. He understood Jesus was calling for something that was not humanly possible. Jesus is calling on him to understand his spiritual bankruptcy and abandon trusting in himself for salvation. The concept of being poor in spirit would have been totally foreign to this Pharisee of Pharisees ... *the teacher of Israel*.

Jesus Continues...

Jesus answered, “Truly I tell you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I told you that you must be born again. The wind blows where it pleases, and you hear its sound, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit,” John 3.5-8.

Without the spiritual washing of the soul, a cleansing accomplished by the Spirit (Titus 3.5), through the Word of God (Ephesians 5.26), no one can enter the kingdom. Even if a physical rebirth were possible it would produce only flesh. Thus, only the Spirit can produce the spiritual birth required for entrance into the kingdom. Again, this would have run against everything Nicodemus would have heard from his youth onward.

Nicodemus Doesn't Get It

"How can these things be?" asked Nicodemus, John 3.9.

Nicodemus had a difficult time accepting what Jesus was saying. He could not, at least at this point, let go of what he had learned his entire life. Jesus, because Nicodemus enjoyed the status of being the leading teacher in Israel, expected him to understand. The concept of regeneration was very much a part of Old Testament theology:

The LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your descendants, and you will love him with all your heart and all your soul so that you will live, Deuteronomy 30.6

"Look, the days are coming"—this is the LORD's declaration—"when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. This one will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors on the day I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt—my covenant that they broke even though I am their master"—the LORD's declaration. "Instead, this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days"—the LORD's declaration. "I will put my teaching within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will one teach his neighbor or his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they will all know me, from the least to the greatest of them"—this is the LORD's declaration. "For I will forgive their iniquity and never again remember their sin, Jeremiah 31.31-34

"When they arrive there, they will remove all its abhorrent acts and detestable practices from it. I will give them integrity of heart and put a new spirit within them; I will remove their heart of stone from their bodies and give them a heart of flesh, so that they will follow my statutes, keep my ordinances, and practice them. They will be my people, and I will be their God, Ezekiel 11.18-20.

Nicodemus would have been acquainted with these passages but failed to make the connection.

Nicodemus Failed to Believe

Nicodemus has just spent uninterrupted time with Jesus and refused to believe what he directly heard from the Source of truth. While John 3.3-10 emphasizes God's role in salvation, John 3.11-21 begins a section where Jesus emphasizes man's responsibility in salvation.

"Truly I tell you, we speak what we know and we testify to what we have seen, but you do not accept our testimony, John 3.11.

Jesus again addresses Nicodemus personally ... "truly I tell you..." Then he broadens His remarks with "we" to identify himself with the Father and uses "you" to refer not only to Nicodemus ... but to Israel as a whole. The Jews rejected Jesus' testimony. Because they refused to believe that Jesus, they only perpetuated their ignorance. Nicodemus could not fathom the earthly truth of the new birth, 3.12. Since this was true, how could he believe the heavenly realities of Jesus' relationship with the Father, the coming kingdom, or God's plan of redemption?

Intellectually

While Nicodemus admitted Jesus was a teacher sent from God, 3.2, he would not accept Jesus as God.

Spiritually

Jesus has just crushed Nicodemus' self-reliance and works based righteousness. He was unwilling to admit he was a sinner (unthinkable for a Pharisee to do). Jesus' call for him to humble himself and admit his sinfulness and need for salvation was just too far for him to go. All the miracles, signs, and wonders

were a thrill for Nicodemus ... but the reality of what was involved in calling Jesus Lord and Savior was, at least at this time, simply too much for him.

What About Us?

What will we do with Jesus?

At some point in life, every person will be confronted with the reality of their sin and the weight of their guilt. Some will seek a remedy through works of personal righteousness ... trying to move the scale closer to their side through their own efforts. Their own self-righteousness and pride will blind them to their absolute need for outside intervention. Sin is a problem we cannot remedy ourselves. Some will only learn this after it is too late.

Others will humble themselves and throw themselves down at the foot of the cross. Realizing they have absolutely nothing to bring, they will cast their heart before the Lord and call upon Him. Turning from their sin, they will surrender to His Lordship, confess His name, and be baptized ... allowing the Spirit to take up residence in their heart for the purpose of transformation. It is to these who salvation is promised.

What will you do with Jesus?

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