



— WEEK THREE —
“FOR YOUR GROWTH”

— CHECK-IN —

How are you? What’s one cool thing God has done in your life in the last week? And, hopefully you’ve been binging (binge-ing?) *The Chosen* to keep up with the series. What’s the last show you binged? Was it a recent hit like *Yellowstone* or a fan fave like *The Mandalorian*? Let’s be honest, it was probably *Golden Girls*, right?

— OPENING PRAYER —

**God of Disruption, unsettle us.
Draw us out of our ruts and help us to grow closer to you.**

— INTRODUCTION —

Congratulations, we're halfway through Lent! Only 3 weeks 'til you can have chocolate again, (or whatever you gave up.) Remember, Lent is the 40 days, not including Sundays, that lead up to Easter. And Christians have been using this time to self-reflect and rid ourselves of things that stand in the way of our relationship with God, all with the purpose of preparing our hearts for Easter. To help us do that, we've been bingeing the stories of the tv show, *The Chosen*, and their Biblical references to discover what we can learn from them in order to deepen our relationship with Christ and prepare our hearts for his resurrection. Today, we'll look at one of the more enigmatic figures of the gospel and how this man was drawn to Jesus because his view of the world simply no longer worked once he met this Messiah. But first...

Warm-up Question: Last week, we studied the story of Matthew, the tax collector, and were challenged to view our “condition” as a gift. How were you able to use your gifts this week, turning your condition into the unique thing you bring to the followers of Jesus Christ?

— THE CHOSEN —

Let's review the theme for our Lenten series: Jesus's most devoted followers were drawn to him because... in him they found healing for their *brokenness*. And we are diving into these characters and their stories because in them we identify our own brokenness, such that we might be drawn to Jesus in the same powerful and healing way they were. Let's briefly review where we've been. The first of *The Chosen's* "chosen" for our series...

MARY MAGDALENE

...reminded us that despite our "demons," we too are called by name, and chosen, not despite our past, but rather *for our healing*. And last week, we met...

MATTHEW

...who showed us that despite our "conditions" in life, God chooses us such that we might use our gifts to lead others to Jesus. Mary's brokenness was a past defined by shame. Matthew's brokenness was a "condition" that he had to overcome. Today, we look at a character who stands on the periphery of Jesus's followers. And, the reason he remains on the periphery will be the crux of the matter. His name is...

NICODEMUS

Now, we know a bit about Nicodemus from his stories in John's gospel, but the nature of how he comes to know Jesus is a bit of a mystery. All we really know is... he shows up for a conversation.

Read John, chapter 3, verses 1 through 3.

This is probably the beginning of a very long night... Nicodemus asking questions, Jesus giving his Jesus-y responses, Nicodemus challenging with his learned theology, Jesus rebutting with a different interpretation. But the beauty of this interaction is in Nicodemus's curiosity and desire to learn from Jesus.

Question 1: What stands out to you about this story? If you were Nicodemus and got a one-on-one with Jesus, what questions would you have asked? How would you have felt about Jesus's responses?

Nicodemus is a bit of an enigma. So, let's start with what we do know. First, he's not a disciple of Jesus... at least, he's not listed as one of the "Big 12." And so, we don't know if he was a regular follower of Jesus beyond the few interactions the author relates to us. Second, the reason he's probably not a regular follower of Jesus is... he's a member of the Pharisees. Quick history lesson... the Pharisees were a religious order in the Jewish faith who studied, taught, and upheld religious law. They weren't priests, just really passionate lay people, who saw themselves as self-appointed defenders, vigilantes if you will, of the Jewish religious

law. They often brought people who defied this law in front of the courts to be tried and convicted, especially those they considered blasphemers or false prophets, (i.e. Jesus.) They get a notoriety because their involvement in later stories, but they weren't all bad. And this is where we find Nicodemus. In fact, Nicodemus is described as a *leader* of the Pharisees. So, he's a big deal with a lot of influence, and cavorting with the primary blasphemer in that region could have been devastating to his role and esteem. Other Pharisees would not have approved, to say the least.

And yet, Nicodemus goes to visit Jesus, anyway. Why? Well, if you've paid attention the last couple weeks, you know this is precisely where the tv show, *The Chosen*, finds its sweet spot creating interesting backstories that bring people to Jesus. They take a few of the tidbits from what we read between the lines and create this really cool storyline around Nicodemus's character.

Question 2: Pull out your Bibles, (app or print,) and find this Scripture. Pretend you're a writer on the show, tasked with creating the backstory for Nicodemus? What does he reveal about why he's there? What has he seen and heard? What is he facing?

Hopefully you found some of the hints the show did. For example, we read that he goes to see Jesus under the cover of darkness. This suggests he's genuinely curious, interested in knowing more, but that he's probably had arguments about Jesus with his

colleagues and fears their judgment. Also, Nicodemus calls Jesus, “rabbi,” a Hebrew word for “teacher” or “master.” This suggests he’s probably heard Jesus teach in person and respects what he’s heard. He doesn’t see it as heresy like the other Pharisees do. In verse 2, Nicodemus also mentions Jesus’s “miraculous signs” and admits he’s sent from God, suggesting he’s witnessed one of those miracles. It’s unlikely, especially for a Pharisee, he would approve of someone’s teaching and believe in someone’s power to do miracles had he not seen them for himself. This is precisely the backstory the show gives to Nicodemus. (Well done! Call Dallas Jenkins and tell him you’re ready to write for the show.) In fact, they take it one step farther. They suggest the miracle he witnesses is the healing of Mary Magdalene (from our week 1. Cool, right?)

Is that how it actually happened? Is that the miraculous sign he witnessed that made him seek a clandestine meeting with this teacher? Who knows? He was in Capernaum when all this was going on, so it’s as good a story as any. What we *do* know is that something powerful, something he could not explain, did draw him to want to talk to Jesus. And for Nicodemus, (a Pharisee, a defender of Jewish law, a self-appointed vigilante,) to want to go learn from Jesus, this man who is claiming to be God who his colleagues are calling a false prophet and heretic, something had to have shaken him to his core. And so, he's struggling. He knows the law forward and backward. His entire identity has been wrapped up in it. It's more than what he believes, it's who he is.

It's his entire worldview. And he cannot reconcile this identity with the man now sitting in front of him. And so, he is broken. And it is this brokenness that draws him to Jesus...

DESPITE HIS POSITION

And we're not just talking about his societal "position" as a Pharisee. His beliefs, his education, his worldview... all of it... has just been rocked to its core. His theological position that held the Jewish law as equivalent to God, his spiritual position as a believer in the One true God of Israel and no one could claim to be Yahweh without being put to death, his cultural and educational position that informed his entire belief system, giving him preconceived notions about everything he saw and did... Jesus shattered the whole thing. This was Nicodemus's brokenness, his position... beliefs, opinions, education, theology... that held him back. And yet, Jesus chose him anyway.

Question 3: We aren't all religious experts and holy vigilantes, like the Pharisees. However, we do all have things we believe that inform how we view the world. What is a belief you grew up with that, like Nicodemus, you've questioned since? Is there something you're struggling with now?

Jesus chose Nicodemus despite all that... despite the narrowminded zeal for the law, despite the indoctrination that prevented him from embracing who Jesus truly was. He was

chosen anyway, despite his position. And here's why... Jesus spent his entire life shattering people's view of the world, almost like he got a kick out of it. But he didn't stop 2000 years ago. Jesus still revels in shattering our narrow, comfortable, limited views of the world. It almost seems as if you cannot follow Jesus without having your beliefs challenged, without having that nice neat little box where you put your way of looking at the world... torn apart. Jesus wants for us the same thing he wanted for Nicodemus in this powerful moment: to be chosen, not just despite your position on the world, but rather...

FOR YOUR GROWTH

Jesus wanted Nicodemus to grow beyond his narrow, legalistic worldview. Jesus wanted him to get out of his head and into his heart. He wanted Nic to understand the kingdom of God was not about obedience to the Law, but about embracing a God who loved him so much that God sent Jesus into the world, not to condemn Nicodemus, but to save him. Sound familiar? Yeah, John 3:16, that most famous of scriptures and the foundational passage of Christian belief, that's from *this* conversation! When Jesus says, "For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but will live with him forever," he's saying that to a curious, broken Pharisee! Changes the context, doesn't it? That line was said to Nicodemus, trying to get him to understand that his faith wasn't a relationship of law but a relationship of love. Jesus chose Nicodemus for his *growth*.

Question 4: Jesus chose you for your growth, as well. In what area of your life might Jesus be challenging you to grow? Where are you feeling the stretching of God to do different, believe different, or feel different? Consider your answer to Question 3 above... what would growth look like in that area?

— CLOSING —

Does Nicodemus get it? Does he grow? Does he believe Jesus is the Messiah? Sorry, we never find out. John never really tells us. The Bible ends this section of the story with Jesus doing the “God so loved the world...” bit, and we never hear a response from Nicodemus. *The Chosen* ends season 1, (spoiler alert,) with Nicodemus in a crisis of faith, watching Jesus and his disciples leave Capernaum, unable to follow. Jesus, sensing Nicodemus watching them leave, whispers this heart-breaking line, “you came so close.” Nicodemus does pop up two more times in the gospel of John, (so we probably haven’t heard the last of his story in the show, either.) First, he defends Jesus against other Pharisees. So, we know he didn’t leave his order, (thus the reason the show has him unable to leave with Jesus.) However, we also see Nicodemus after the death of Christ among those who take his body down to prepare and bury him. So, he’s still there on the periphery. Maybe in that powerful moment, he does get it. Maybe not. The point is, don’t let that be Jesus’s line for you. Don’t let that line describe you, “You came so close.” How many times do we come so close to what God

wants for us? How many times do we come so close to having the fullness and depth of relationship and commitment to Christ but can't get out of our own way? How often do we come so close to opening ourselves up to a new way of thinking or believing or living, only to crawl back into our comfort zone? Don't let your position, your belief system, your comfort zone, be a reason that you don't follow or deepen your relationship with Christ. God, like Nicodemus, has chosen you for your growth.

**Take some time to share prayer requests or celebrations.
Close in prayer.**