

Nicodemus Comes To Jesus By Night

The Holy Spirit has been speaking to us about faith in our recent studies - about believing in Jesus. In John 2, the Holy Spirit told us about John and Andrew following and talking with Jesus, and how, as a result, they believed that Jesus was the Messiah. Not only did they believe, but Peter, Philip, and Nathanel believed too! The first four believed because of what they heard, but Nathanel believed because of a sign. Jesus performed a sign at the wedding in Cana, and as a result, these five disciples believed in Him. He could do miracles! At the close of our last study, we also discovered that many people had seen the signs that Jesus did while He was in Jerusalem for the Passover. As a result, they believed in Him. But Jesus did not trust them because their faith was weak. They believed He could do miracles, but did they really believe? The Holy Spirit has been talking to us about faith, and this study is just one more step along the path.

HE CAME BY NIGHT. It appears that one of the Jewish leaders, a Jewish rabbi named Nicodemus, had also been watching Jesus perform miracles and signs. We discover in the opening verse of this study, that Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; 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."
John 3:1-2 (NASB)

The phrase "ruler of the Jews" means that he was a member of the Sanhedrin Council. The Sanhedrin Council was the top religious body of the Jewish nation. This means that Nicodemus was a powerful individual among Jews and highly respected as a holy man. John 3:10 tells us that Nicodemus was also a teacher of



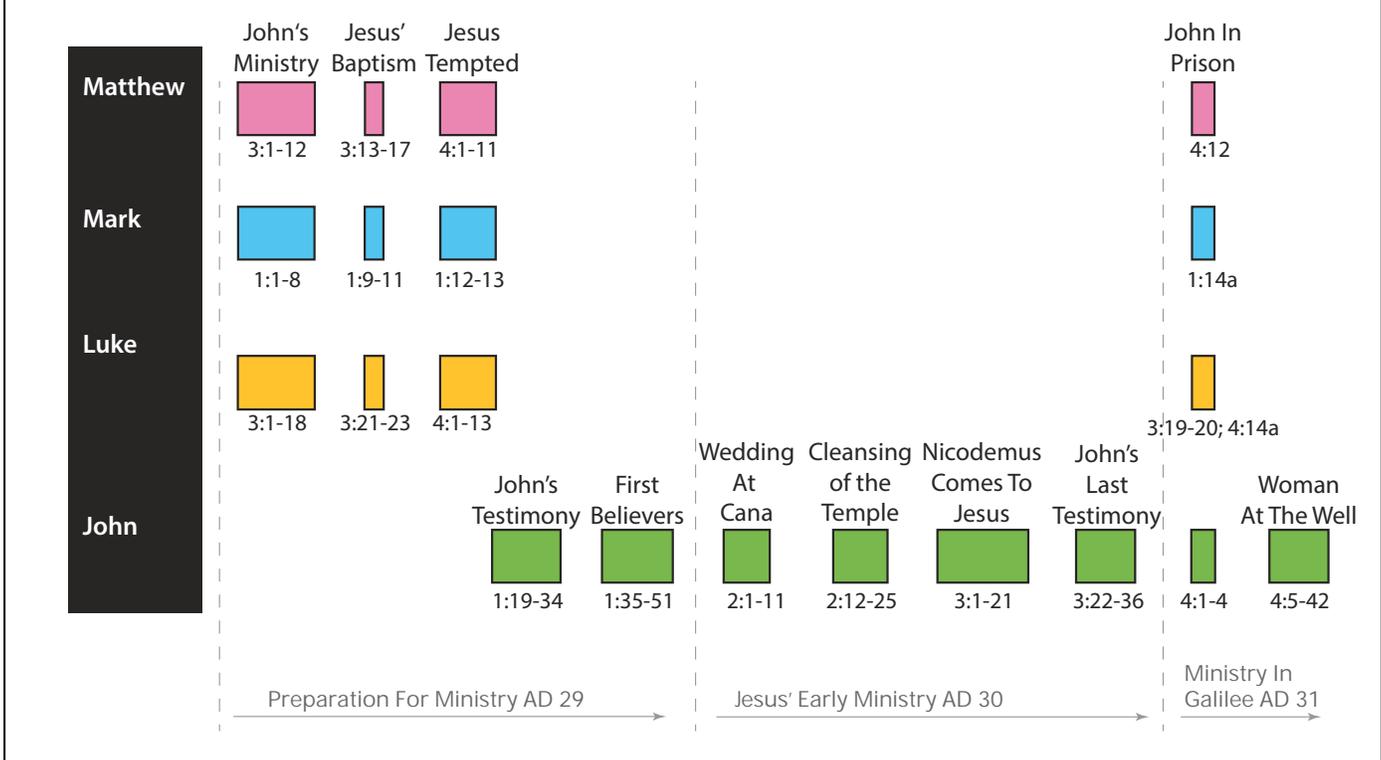
Israel. This may mean that he was considered to be the top teacher in Israel. Nicodemus was not your ordinary Jewish man. He was not the ordinary Pharisee because he had come to a different conclusion than that of his fellow rabbis. He believed that God was with Jesus, and he wanted to know more.

As a result, Nicodemus visited Jesus in order to discover more about Him. But apparently Nicodemus did not want to be seen by the other Pharisees and/or members of the Sanhedrin Council. Nicodemus was a busy man, but he could have taken time to visit Jesus during the day if he had wanted to. He did not do that. John 7:45-52 gives us a peek into

the inner circle of the Pharisees and suggests why he came at night. In the passage we discover that the Pharisees were against Jesus and were applying pressure on the other members who might be starting to believe in Him.

They followed the pattern described in Romans 1:32,

Life and Heart of Jesus



... they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them. Romans 1:32 (NASB)

This is very common even with us today. We pressure others to think and act as we do. Most of us do not want others to believe differently than we do. So we pressure them and challenge them in polite ways. Adults apply peer pressure in a more graceful way. The Pharisees were doing the same thing. But there was danger in disagreeing with the Pharisees. They would malign your character with the goal of destroying you. That is also common today.

There is one key book that we all need to trust and it is the Bible. Why? Because God has spoken to us in that book. It is sin to pressure others to think as we do. Ultimately it is the Holy Spirit who brings conviction over sin and guides us into truth (John 16:13). When someone disagrees with us, the best approach to take is to pray for them. Otherwise, we might force people to yield to us without really changing

what they believe.

So it appears that Nicodemus recognized the danger of being seen with Jesus. Consequently he did not want anyone to know that he was visiting Jesus. So he came by night.

YOU MUST BE BORN. We are not told about their first words of welcome or embraces. Jesus did not talk about His ministry or about how God had used Him. He was not sharing the Sunday School attendance, the annual church budget, how many programs the church had, or the latest building program of His church with this Pharisee. Jesus was not into pride and worldly measures of success. Apparently, Jesus skipped the introductions and focused on a key question. It was a question about the most important thing in Nicodemus' life - his eternal destiny.

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

Jesus responded by simply telling Nicodemus that there is only one way to get into the kingdom of God. He had to be born from above. This was stunning news to Nicodemus because this is not what he believed.

Jesus used the phrase “born again.” This phrase is quoted often by the media, news magazines, and politicians in the United States. It is also used by Christians to refer to “real” Christians, but the phrase should actually be “born from above” and not “born again.” The phrase “born again” is a poor translation of the Greek *anōthen* which is better translated as “born from above” as we will see later when we arrive at John 3:31.

Nicodemus did not understand Jesus because he thought he could enter the kingdom of God by works. So it appears that he politely challenged Jesus.

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?” John 3:4 (NASB)

But Nicodemus just missed it. He did not understand that Jesus was talking about a spiritual birth and not another physical birth. It often happens that when we tell others about Jesus they misunderstand how to obtain eternal life.

WATER AND THE SPIRIT. So Jesus tried to help him.

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.” John 3:5 (NASB)

Jesus’ statement can be difficult to understand. Therefore, we want to stop and discuss this verse for a little while before we go on. We want to discover what Jesus meant. Imagine for a moment that you are Nicodemus. You have been watching John the Baptist and Jesus for a while. What do you think He would have seen them doing? First, you would have seen Jesus doing miracles and performing signs. Second, you have watched Jesus teaching people. John 2:1-12, 23 tell us that Jesus did miracles and signs. We know from John 3:22-23 and 4:1-2 that both John and Jesus’ disciples were baptizing people, but not Jesus. But the baptism of John

and Jesus’ disciples was about repentance - not salvation. We must not miss John’s statement in Matthew 3:11 where he teaches that he baptized “with water for repentance.” His baptism was not about eternal life. His baptism was getting ready for the kingdom.

As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. Matthew 3:11 (NASB)

Baptism was about repentance!

And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. Mark 1:5 (NASB)

If we look closely at John 3:25-26 we discover that baptism was symbolic of purification. The Jewish ritual of purification involved water. Water did nothing for anyone spiritually. It was strictly a symbolic act of cleansing. In fact the message of John 7:37-39 is that living water is symbolic of the Holy Spirit.

We must remember that Christian baptism was not established until after Jesus ascended back to heaven. John and Jesus were not practicing Christian baptism. In fact, John 4:1-2 states that Jesus did not baptize anyone. So the focus of John 3:5 is on the water and not the act of baptism. Nicodemus would have been reminded of Ezekiel 36:25-27 where “water” and “Spirit” are used together. Water referred to cleansing from sin (Hebrews 1:3; 2 Peter 1:9) and as we have already pointed out John 7:37-39 uses living water to refer to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit changes life. Therefore, to be born from above (John 3:3) results in being washed or cleansed from our sins and regenerated and renewed by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5).

How can we be sure that this is what Jesus was talking about? Jesus actually gives us the answer in the rest of His comments.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born

of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, “You must be born again.” 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. John 3:6-8 (NASB)

Notice that Jesus does not even mention water or baptism in the rest of his comments. He refers only to the Spirit. In fact, Jesus reminds us that we do not know where the wind comes from or where it is going. That is, the new birth - the birth from above - is performed by the Spirit and only by the Spirit. He comes and He goes. He saves us when and where He desires. Salvation is the work of God and only He knows who will be saved. Salvation is the result of new life which given from above!

NICODEMUS IS CONFUSED. But Nicodemus still did not understand. He could not understand how a person could enter the kingdom of God without doing something. Nicodemus had been taught since he was little boy, and he himself had taught others that the only way to get into the kingdom of God was by doing things that earned God’s favor. So he was stunned by what he had heard from Jesus.

Nicodemus said to Him,

“How can these things be?” John 3:9 (NASB)

And Jesus quickly urged him to think some more.

Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel

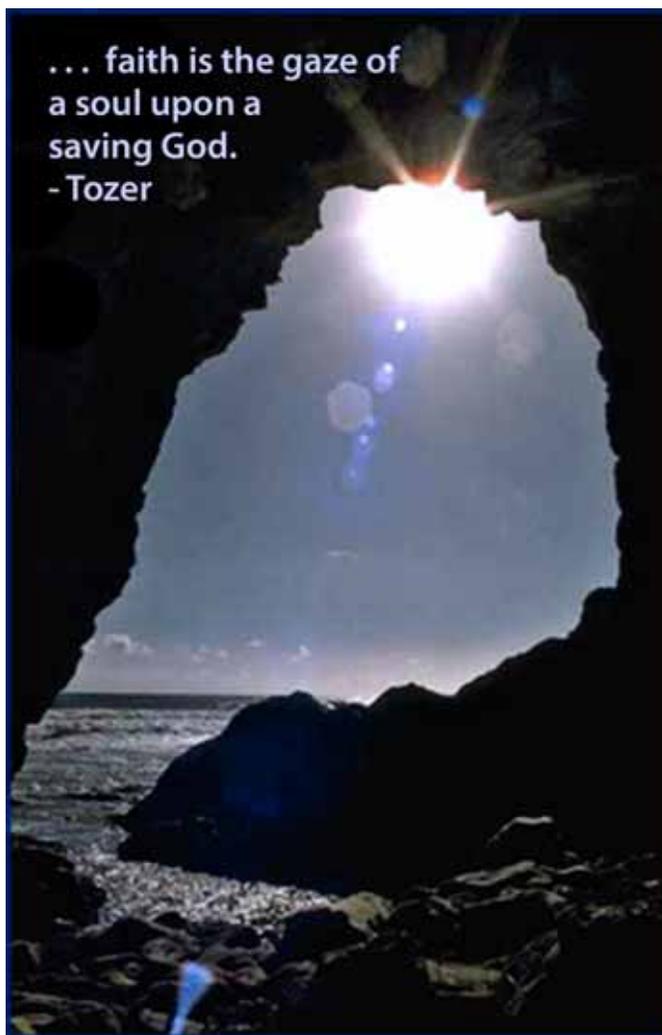
and do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony.” John 3:10-11 (NASB)

Why was this highly educated, well respected religious leader having trouble with Jesus’ statements about being born from above? Why does anyone have trouble with accepting what you or someone else has to say about Jesus? The first part of the answer to our questions is found in the word “We.” Jesus did not say “we” only once. He said it three

times. He said, “We speak, we know and testify, and we have seen.” It appears that the “we” refers to both John the Baptist and Jesus, since both had been ministering together. Both of them had spoken. Both of them knew. Both of them had testified about the good news of the kingdom of God, and both of them had had conversations with God the Father. What was Jesus’ point? It was simply that He was speaking the truth. Jesus was giving Nicodemus reasons to believe in Himself. When Christians tell others about Jesus, we need to do the same - tell them truth.

If someone asked you about Jesus, what would you tell him? If someone said that Jesus was a man, what would you say? Would you

tell him that Jesus was both God and man? What would you tell someone who wanted to become a Christian? The answer I received from one Christian some years ago was, “I would tell them to attend our church.” Another person said, “I would tell them to read the Bible.” Or, “I would have him/



her talk with the pastor.” While these responses are good, they are not the best answer. Now listen to Jesus’ answer to Nicodemus.

If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man.
John 3:12-13 (NASB)

we share our faith with others, and that is exactly what Jesus did next.

Having captured his attention, Jesus now reminded Nicodemus of Moses’ serpent,

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

Jesus started with an earthly illustration, but Nicodemus knew the events of Numbers 21:4-9. He knew

Passage	What Is Required To Become A Christian?			
	Believe	Repent	Confess	Baptize
Mark 1:15	✓			
Luke 8:12	✓			
John 1:12	✓			
3:16	✓			
3:36	✓			
5:24	✓			
6:40	✓			
11:25	✓			
20:31	✓			
Acts 2:38	-	✓		✓
16:31	✓			
19:4	✓	✓		✓
Rom. 3:22	✓			
4:3	✓			
10:9	✓		✓	
Gal. 3:3-9	✓			
3:22	✓			
Eph. 2:8-9	✓			
1 Tim. 1:16	✓			
James 2:23	✓			
1 John 2:23	✓			
<i>These are present as the results of true belief.</i>				

did not understand it. Jesus had kept it simple for this man and now he needed something more. Sometimes when Christians share the great news about Jesus, we tend to make it complicated. Sometimes we want to explain away evolution, defend the Bible, or explain why God allows evil. But what men and women need to know is: who is Jesus? We need to move them from their objections to a discussion about Jesus Christ. All these other things are diversions. Satan wants us to avoid talking about Jesus. He wants us to talk about evolution or abortion. We need to be simple when

that the Israelites had sinned by not believing that God would take care of them, and as a result God sent serpents to bite the complaining Israelites. So Jesus reminds him that Moses made a bronze serpent and lifted it up. All who believed that they would be healed by the simple act of looking on the serpent were healed when they looked. Jesus was making the point that they were saved from the serpents by believing. So every man and woman can be saved by simply believing on the Son of Man - Jesus. Everyone who believes will have eternal life.

JUST BELIEVE. Nicodemus must have understood that Jesus was talking about Himself. It is only natural that he would have wondered how and why Jesus would be lifted up. So Jesus tells Nicodemus that God loves the world, including him.

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. John 3:16 (NASB)

Therefore, God gave His unique Son, Jesus Christ, to the world. Some Bibles refer to Jesus as the “only begotten Son.” But this is due to a bad translation of the Greek word **MONOGENES** which should be “unique.” This same Greek word is also used in Hebrews 11:17 to refer to Abraham’s son Isaac as being “only begotten,” but Abraham had two sons: Isaac and Ishmael. The word cannot refer to “only” or “one.” This means that the translation of “only begotten” is wrong and should be “one and only” or “unique.” The New International Version says, “one and only Son.”

God lifted up His unique Son on a cross so that everyone who believes, relies, or depends upon Him will live into the ages to come. The ancient meaning of the Greek word translated as “believing” means more than just believing that Jesus existed. It involves dependence upon Jesus. It involves a yielding of oneself to Him.

If we look at every passage in the New Testament that has anything to say about how a person becomes a Christian, we discover that the only requirement, that is repeated over and over again, is that we must simply believe or rely upon Jesus Christ. It is all about faith and nothing more! Repentance, confession, and baptism follow real faith in Jesus. Believers have repented of their sins because the Holy Spirit helped them understand that they were sinners. Faith and godly repentance occur together. Believers confessed their sins because they were repentant, and they submitted themselves to baptism because they believed.

CONCLUSION. One of the best ways to explain a concept or a truth is to say it in different ways, or to repeat the concept. So Jesus does that.

For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God. John 3:17-21 (NASB)

Jesus’ message was simple. Everyone who enters this life is already headed for judgment. The question is, “How do we escape?” There is only one way to escape judgment. That way is to believe in Jesus. We must believe that He was real and depend upon Him to forgive our sins.

There was only one way for Nicodemus to have eternal life. He was already headed to eternal judgment. If he did nothing, then judgment would face him on the other side of eternity. Nicodemus already believed that God was with Jesus because of the signs that he had seen Jesus perform. He was now talking with Jesus, the unique Son of God. Nicodemus needed to believe in Jesus! He needed to believe that Jesus was God and seek His forgiveness. He needed to believe! It is all about faith and nothing more!

It appears from John 19:38-42 that Nicodemus did respond by believing in Jesus. This religious ruler, teacher, and Pharisee finally bent the knee of his heart and believed in Jesus. He was finally willing for others to see that he was a follower of Jesus. He sacrificed his position and his stature within Judaism in order to follow Jesus. Nicodemus believed and that was all that was important to him. Nicodemus

St. Augustine once said, “If you believe what you like in the gospel and reject what you do not like, it is not the gospel you believe, but yourself.”

believed what he had heard and then believed in Jesus. Have you? If you have never believed in Jesus, do you know that God loves you and is calling you to Himself? If you already believe in Jesus, then are you telling others about the unique Son of God?

Jesus is the Light of the world. Come and believe the Light and help Him shine on a dark world . . .