

Isaiah 6:1-8

Psalm 29

Romans 8:12-17

John 3:1-17

Home at Last
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GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD

To begin our discussion, review John 2:13-25, which begins, “*The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem*” (v.13)¹. Every Jew able to travel came each year at this time of the year to Jerusalem, to offer sacrifices and celebrate Passover, so the city was packed with visitors from all over.

Most of the people, from the Pharisees down to the least of the visitors, had seen or at least heard of Jesus of Nazareth. He entered the temple and drove out the sellers of goods and the money changers, saying, “*Take these things away; you shall not make my Father's house a house of trade,*” (2:16). The temple authorities, who received cuts from these operations, were less than pleased. As for the rest of the people, “*Many believed in his name when they saw the signs which he did*” (2:23). Chapter 2 concludes with, “*... he knew all men and needed no one to bear witness of man; for he himself knew what was in man*” (2:25).

These verses set the scene for Nicodemus, who came to see Jesus by night. Jesus saw into the heart of Nicodemus. If you had seen him, you would have seen a man who had it all – riches, respect, authority – a man who had every reason to be satisfied and content with his life. But Jesus looked and saw a restless spirit. He saw a man with many questions, unable to set his mind at ease.

John 3:1-2. *Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him.”*

- *A man of the Pharisees* (v.1). The *Pharisees* governed the Jews under the Romans. They were known for their conviction that the law was to be obeyed from beginning to end, with no exceptions. To them “The Law” consisted of the first five books of the Bible, plus the thousands of rabbinic interpretations and details in the Mishnah and Talmud, which attempted to answer every possible question concerning human behavior.

Jesus said he came to fulfill the law. He said, “*Till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished*” (Matt 5:18). Jesus was speaking of God’s laws, not necessarily the interpretations of men. A Pharisee’s dedicated life was admirable in its intent. The trouble, Jesus often said, was that a cruel person could become a Pharisee and find ways to hurt others while obeying the letter, if not the spirit, of the law. (See Mark 7:9-13, for example.)

Perhaps this issue was on the mind of Nicodemus when he came to see Jesus. But he was also a *ruler of the Jews* (v.1) – one of the seventy members of the Sanhedrin, the religious authority over all Jews. One function of the Sanhedrin was to root out and deal with sources of blasphemy and false doctrine, and these were always cropping up. What saved Nicodemus was that he kept an open mind – he was not the kind of person who says in effect, “I’ve already made up my mind – don’t try to confuse me with the facts!”

- *This man came to Jesus by night ...* (v.2). Nicodemus came alone, wishing for a personal, one-on-one visit. You may learn about Jesus as a member of a congregation, but to get to know him, you must come to him alone. You must open your mind and heart to Jesus. It is then that you really learn from him.

- “*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God ...*” (v.2). Nicodemus began as the authority, wishing be kind to this rabbi from Galilee and perhaps give him some advice if he turned out not to be dangerous. But as the interview ensued, we can see the roles reverse. The Pharisee became the child who asked finally, “*How can this be?*” You and I must come to Jesus likewise – not as Pharisees, but as children.

¹ Bible quotations are from the RSV.

John 3:3-8. *Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”* ⁴*Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?”* ⁵*Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew.’ ⁸The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit.”*

- *“Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God ...”* (v.3). By this we know Jesus knew the heart of Nicodemus. The question was unspoken, but it was there: “The law has been my life, and yet there is something missing – something people seem to find in this Rabbi. What is it?”
- *“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb ... ?”* Nicodemus must have known Jesus did not mean a second physical birth. He would have known from scriptures such as Ezek 36:27, *“I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes ...,”* that Jesus was speaking of a changed life, not physical rebirth. But, like us, Nicodemus did not at first believe God would be willing to remake a man’s life. He thought we needed to become righteous on our own.
- *“Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God”* (v.5). Some say the *water* and *Spirit* signify physical birth (water in the womb) and spiritual birth (*“Christ in you”* – Col 1:27). Others say both signify new birth – the *water of life* (John 4:13-14) and the Spirit that enables one to become a *child of God* (John 1:12-13). In either case, we must not overlook the second half of verse 5.

On many occasions Jesus said plainly, as he said here, that he is the only way to heaven. Unless you receive new life in him, *“You cannot enter the kingdom of God,”* he said to Nicodemus. To his disciples he said, *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.”* (John 14:6). Peter, inspired by the Spirit, said, *“There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved”* (Acts 4:12). And Paul wrote to Timothy, *“There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus”* (1 Tim 1:5).

Now that you have considered the words Nicodemus heard on that night, you face the same decision he faced – namely, whether or not to believe in Jesus Christ and receive from him forgiveness and eternal life.

John 3:9-17. *Nicodemus said to him, “How can this be?”* ¹⁰*Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this? ¹¹Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen; but you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”*

¹⁶*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.*

- *“How can this be?”* (v.9). People still ask this. Nicodemus left the interview with much to ponder. He was a man with riches and honors, yet deeply moved by the words of Jesus. We know this because he defended Jesus before the Pharisees (John 7:50-51) and brought expensive spices for his burial (John 19:39).
- *“We speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen ... No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man”* (v.11-13). Jesus ended the interview by authenticating what he had said on his own authority, not that of prophecy or scripture. These things were true, he said, because he himself had known and seen them in heaven. He had come from heaven to reveal them.
- *“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life”* (v.14). The serpent on the pole (Num 21:4-9) has become the icon of the medical profession – lifted up as a symbol of healing. Jesus was lifted up on the cross to heal us from the deadly poison of our sin, and lifted to heaven to be forever the great Symbol and Author of our salvation so that *whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*