

*It is more profitable to know Jesus than to know about Him.*

**Weekly Edition – June 30, 2017**  
**Gospel According to St. John – Second Year**

### The Gospel of John: Jesus Teaches Nicodemus

**3** Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. **2** He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

**3** Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

**4** "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

**5** Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. **6** Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. **7** You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' **8** The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

**9** "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

**10** "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? **11** Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. **12** I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? **13** No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. **14** Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, **15** that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

**16** For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. **17** For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. **18** Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. **19** This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. **20** Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. **21** But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

### Entering into Scripture: A Meditation on Nicodemus with Jesus

I must be careful here in how I approach this. On the one hand, this man Jesus is clearly extraordinary - no one has ever seen things like He is doing, and no teacher has ever been raised up in all of Israel with so much wisdom since Solomon. John, the one who has been baptizing in

the desert, has said that the One we have been expecting is now among us. Is Jesus the One?

On the other hand, the leadership of Israel is clearly hostile towards Him - all the more following that episode in the Temple last Passover. I do not share their hostility, but as one man,

#### The Gospel of St. John

##### Part I

- Prologue 1:1-14
- First Year 1:15 – 2:22
- Second Year 2:23 – 6:71
- Third Year 7:1 – 12:50

##### Part II

- The Last Discourse 13:1 – 17:26
- The Arrest and Trial 18:1 – 19:16
- Death and Resurrection 19:16 (b) – 21:25

*It is more profitable to know Jesus than to know about Him.*

there is only so much I can do. Besides, as a member of the ruling council, the Sanhedrin, I have a place of responsibility before God and all of Israel. Whether I like to admit it or not, I am being watched on account of my rank and position as a ruler of the Jews. What I do or say can have a significant impact - for the better or for the worse. If this Jesus really is the Anointed One of God, we should not want to miss out. But if He is not, I wouldn't want my actions to put myself or others at the grave risk of blaspheming God.

I wish that were all, but there is more complication involved here too. If my words or actions show people that I am one of His followers, the people might properly ask why the Sanhedrin doesn't invite Jesus in and even place Him at the head. Caiaphas wouldn't like that at all, and even a hint that I might be leaning that way would put me at great risk. I have a great deal to lose if I get this wrong. I and my family could be disgraced and put out of the Temple. That would make not only me, but everyone in my family into outcasts, pariahs, into the class of the unclean.

This is why I disguised myself when I went down to the river to be baptized by John - and why I went late in the day when fewer people were around. So if I want to have a conversation with Jesus, I need to seek Him out when He is alone, away from the Temple and the adoring crowds. I would very much like to ask Him some questions privately, so as not to give my fellow Sanhedrin members any ammo to use against me, and not give the crowds any threads to latch onto - threads which could become my own unraveling.

I learn about where Jesus is staying by asking one of His followers - who from his accent gave himself up as a Galilean. Early in the evening, at the start of the first watch, I went to Him secretly and disguised so as not to be recognized.

Coming to the place where Jesus was staying, I knock. I am greeted warmly by those who are with Him. I don't think they are able to recognize me, as I had soiled my hands and worked up a good

sweat during the afternoon and came dressed in work clothes so as not to give myself away. I asked to see the Teacher, and I am ushered into an upper room where He is alone in prayer. Jesus does not appear to be bothered in anyway by my interruption. He motions for the others to leave the two of us alone, and they depart.

After a few minutes, He is the first to speak. "What brings you here tonight Nicodemus?" The color drains from my face and I feel a knot in the pit of my stomach! My secret is out! He recognizes me! A rush of emotion comes upon me and my thoughts begin to swirl. I fight to regain my composure.

"Rabbi, we know You are a teacher sent by God, as no one could do what You do - all the miraculous signs - if God were not with Him."

He looked into my eyes. I felt naked before Him, as if He could see right into me. "Amen, I tell you the truth: no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again," Jesus said.

The words linger in the air. There is silence. I am still reeling from being found out. Now this. More silence. I ponder His words. "How can a man be born when he is old?" I stammer. "Surely, he cannot enter his mother's womb a second time."

"I tell you the truth, Nicodemus, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to the Spirit," He continued. "You should not be surprised. The Spirit is like the wind. No one has ever seen it, but we all feel it when it blows and can see the things it moves. So it is with those born of the Spirit," Jesus said.

I am both puzzled and confused. This is a different teaching. It is hard to accept. "How can this be?" I ask.

"You are Israel's teacher and you do not understand these things? Jesus asks. His tone is firm, but I sense no condemnation in His voice. Once more I feel naked - naked and bewildered.

*It is more profitable to know Jesus than to know about Him.*

"I tell you the truth Nicodemus, We speak of what We know and testify to what We have seen, but still you and your people do not accept Our testimony," Jesus continued.

My head swirls in a jumbled mass of confusion. What He says is right. We don't accept it. That's why I am here at night, and under the cover of a not-so-good disguise. Yet there is something about this man and His teaching that is simply and utterly captivating. I wish I could sit at His feet like His followers and listen to Him. That is what my heart desires. I came with so many questions, but right now, alone with Jesus - just the two of us one-on-one - my mind goes blank. I can't seem to compose a single question. I now feel very self-conscious, maybe even a bit flush. Frankly, I feel stupid. Stupid and vulnerable.

Thankfully, Jesus took the lead. He seemed to have pity on me and He spoke with compassion. "Nicodemus, I am speaking to you of earthly things and you do not believe. How then will you believe if I speak to you of heavenly things? But that you would know that I speak with authority from My Father, allow me to speak with you of heavenly things," He said.

"No one has ever gone into heaven except the One who came down from heaven - the Son of Man," Jesus said. I am at once captivated and confused. My mind traces through things I understand. "Son of Man" is a peculiar phrase used only sparingly in the Sacred Text. It referred to the prophet Ezekiel - the one whom God instructed to eat the scroll upon which was written the Word of the Lord. Is Jesus saying He is Ezekiel come down from heaven? But no? Surely Moses is in heaven, so what does He mean by saying no one has ever gone into heaven? It makes no sense to me.

Jesus continued, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up so that all who believe in Him may have eternal life."

"Ah ha!" I think to myself: there He said "Moses." Moses gave us the Law, and as a Pharisee the Law

is the most important thing in my life. I study God's Word and the oral traditions handed down by our fathers. So I immediately recognize that Jesus is speaking of the snake fashioned of bronze and mounted to a pole. This was done by the Lord's command when Israel had bitterly complained about being in the wilderness. The Lord sent venomous snakes among the people that bit them and many were killed. Moses made appeal to the Lord on behalf of the people and the Lord told him to make this bronze snake and lift it up on a pole. The people were instructed to gaze upon it if they were snake-bitten, and by doing so they would live. The story flashes across my mind as Jesus continued to speak.

"For God loved the world so much that He gave His One and Only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life," Jesus continued. "God did not send His Son into the world to condemn it, but to save the world through Him."

My mind swirls with thoughts: God has only one son? Are we not all God's children? How can there be just one son? What does He mean God gave Him? The image of the bronze snake lifted high on a pole is still fixed in my mind. "God loves the world," I silently think to myself. He is a God of loving-kindness, slow to anger and abounding in love...

My thoughts rake back and forth over His words: One and only Son. God gave Him to the world. Gave so that believers will not perish. Given not to condemn the world, but save it. Save it through Him. These are hard things.

Jesus breaks the silence once more. "Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe in Him stands condemned already because he has not believed in the Name of God's One and Only Son." I want to believe. It's just that none of this makes sense to me. My entire life - everything I am - is shaped by the Law of Moses. I am careful to adhere to every last statute. Doesn't that make me right with God? I am one of the good guys. Now He is telling me I

*It is more profitable to know Jesus than to know about Him.*

am condemned? I shift uncomfortably in my seat and the sound of silence fills the upper room.

"This is the verdict," Jesus went on. "Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead because their deeds were evil. Whoever lives by the truth is not afraid of the light but will come into it, so it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

It is the first time tonight that I have felt any kind of challenge directed at me personally. "Men loved darkness," I repeat with my inside voice. Do I love darkness? I came here tonight under the cover of darkness. Yet my whole life, my whole way of living and being is ordered according to the Law of Moses. Surely Moses was God's messenger. Surely Moses wasn't wrong.

"Should I go on?" Jesus asks me. I could feel His warmth once more in His words. There is a long pause. My mind is awash with thoughts and confusion. These are hard things. The more He speaks the more muddled my thoughts become. My heart wants Him to go on, but I feel very full,

like I can't absorb another thought. My brain is full. I can take no more.

After a long pause, I say "No." More silence. "You have given me a great deal to think about. Thank You for receiving me tonight."

Jesus waits for me to rise before standing up to walk me out. As I turn towards the top of the steps, my eyes are cast to the floor. I am disappointed. I feel as though my mission in coming here tonight was a complete failure. I didn't ask any of the questions I came here to ask.

"Nicodemus," He says, "Good night." His voice is warm and reassuring. I pause and look up as He places His hand on my shoulder. Our eyes meet. I feel so much love from Him. "Do not fear, you must be born again. Listen to your heart!"

With those words I descend the stairs, bid goodnight to His companions on the floor below and step out into the warm still air of the night. "Funny," I think to myself, there is no breeze tonight. The Spirit must not be moving. And I quietly make my way home under the dome of stars above.

## Reflection 1: An Inking

On this night Nicodemus caught a glimmer of Light! He perceived that the Law of Moses, which itself was good, was not in and of itself sufficient for attaining eternal life. It stood out to him that there was something more, something that wasn't so explicitly spelled out. Yet Nicodemus remembered what God Himself said concerning the Law: "What do I need with the blood of bulls and goats? Your holocausts are offensive to Me!" What is "born

again?" Born of the Spirit? Something rang out as true, even if he couldn't put it into words. I praise You Lord for Nicodemus' desire to learn – for his spirit of curiosity by which he was willing to risk so much to come to You. I thank You, Lord, for showing us through him that You welcome our questions, even our doubts. I praise You that You are eager to receive us, whether we come to You in the daylight or under cloak of darkness.

## Reflection 2: Many Witnesses

"We speak," Jesus said. He is not the only witness. We speak. The Law and the prophets speak along with Me, Jesus says. The Father and the Holy Spirit speak along with Me. Everything in creation speaks along with Me and points towards Me, if only you have eyes to see and ears to hear. The Word of the Lord is very near to us; it is in our mouth and in our

heart so we may obey it. It speaks as a still small voice. The witnesses are many. And We all speak. Who is listening? Lord, Jesus, help me to listen to these Witnesses. Open my eyes to behold Your majesty in all these witnesses. Open my ears to hear Your Word spoken in Scripture, and on the pages of my life.

*It is more profitable to know Jesus than to know about Him.*

### Reflection 3: Son of Man

"Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against Me; they and their ancestors have been in revolt against Me to this very day." These are the words God spoke to the prophet Ezekiel. Now Jesus tells Nicodemus that no one has gone into heaven except the Son of Man. The Word spoken to Ezekiel continues with this: "And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid, though briars and thorns are all around you and you live among scorpions. Do not be afraid of what they say or be terrified by them, though they are a rebellious people." In the privacy of this upper room with one of Israel's leading teachers, Jesus identifies Himself

with the figure of the Son of Man. He portrays His earthly mission to one of Israel's own leaders, in the words Nicodemus would understand. But the eyes of the old man were not yet opened. Nicodemus could not yet connect the dots – how David spoke of his own offspring calling Him "Lord." How it is that One who comes from David's seed is also the One whom David worships! It is a clue to heavenly things that will be better understood with the Rosetta Stone of Christ's passion, death and resurrection. Help me to connect the dots in my own understanding. Help me to release my own wrong ideas of what it means to be born again in You.

### Reflection 4: Heavenly Things

First, You reveal Yourself to Nicodemus as the Son of Man. Immediately thereafter You ask Nicodemus to recall the snake lifted up in the desert. He does not understand this now, but later, after the Cross, we behold the mystery contained in the bronze snake – how a thing in itself can become the cure for its own thing. How Christ's death for my sin is the cure for my death; how by looking upon and meditating on Your death and resurrection my own

rising to eternal life in You is procured. Surely his heart must have burned within him as You spoke to Nicodemus Lord. Nicodemus was a learned man, indeed an expert. Yet so much of his understanding was either wrong or incomplete. Teach me, Lord. Open my eyes and unstop my ears. Do not leave me as a learned man with wrong thinking, with incomplete understanding. Help me love You more and more!