

## SCRIPTURE

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

*In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."*

*"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"*

*Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again. 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.'"*

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

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

*"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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God." JOHN 3:1-21*

His résumé is impressive:

- Pharisee: one of the intellectual guardians of the Law.
- Member of the Sanhedrin: the esteemed ruling council.
- Israel's teacher: the authority, the one whose opinion could sway the vote, the one whose words were most quoted.

Most impressive. Nicodemus is at the top of the religious ladder, looking down on everyone else.

But the view from the top is, at best, disappointing. He can't see from here all that he'd hoped to see. So much still eludes him, confuses him. So now, he steps down from that ladder to walk the streets. Searching.

At night. That's when he comes. He wants no one else to see that the so-called expert has gone to seek the expertise of another. The darkness also pictures the shroud of legalism and tradition that dim his thinking and darken his heart.

These two words follow Nicodemus through John's Gospel like a stray dog. When John later describes him, he doesn't mention his impressive credentials, but rather this telling clue to his character: *"Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night."*

Thus, cloaked in darkness, Nicodemus wends his way through the side streets and alleys of Jerusalem, slowly... cautiously... every so often stepping into the shadows to avoid recognition.

He comes as a seeker of truth. But he comes at night.

He comes not in an official capacity but in a personal one. It's a risky meeting. Gossip could hurt him. He has much to lose: his prestige as Israel's teacher, his position on the ruling council, his entire peer group.

But still he comes. Not for curiosity's sake but for conscience's sake.

The buying and selling in the temple courtyard has always bothered him. But he looked the other way.

"What's good for business is good for the temple," the moneychangers would say, flashing their toothy grins as he passed them on his way to the temple. But he always felt uneasy about it. Unclean.

Then this Jesus came. And he didn't like what he saw either. Something about the way he upended their tables and chased their animals from the courtyard seemed... seemed... like the cleansing wrath of God, like a silversmith burning away the dross that had accumulated around the new goblet he's crafting.

But Jesus turned over more than the tables of the moneychangers that day. He upended the wooden thinking of the most prominent teacher in all Israel.

How the words of this unorthodox Jesus haunted Nicodemus: *"How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!" ... "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."*

Who could explain such words?

Israel asked its teacher. But the teacher had no answer.

And the report of Jesus changing the water into wine. Who could explain that? How could Jesus do such a thing unless, unless God's hand was truly upon him. But he has no credentials, no

formal schooling, and he's completely sidestepped the established religious structure. He's an enigma, this Jesus.

Nicodemus wonders, "Could he possibly be...? No. And yet. Hmmm."

Night after night, Nicodemus wrestles with the same question: "*Could this be the Messiah?*" And night after sleepless night, it backs him into a corner, demanding an answer.

So he comes. At night, yes. But still he comes.

Nicodemus is the most important, most influential man Jesus has met at this point in this life, and yet in this meeting, the influence flows entirely the other direction.

No doubt, Jesus is exhausted from a day of teaching, answering questions, performing miracles. But he is accessible, always accessible, to the one who comes. And he meets Nicodemus when Nicodemus dares to meet him. At night.

It is a disarming meeting for this Pharisee, both theologically and personally. And as the conversation seesaws back and forth, the weight of it falling on Jesus, it's plain to see, even at night, who is the teacher and who is the one taking notes.

Nicodemus listens. Quietly. Respectfully. Intently. Peering deep into Jesus' eyes.

Nicodemus has rubbed shoulders with the most respected minds in the religious world. Some were his teachers; some, his students. They were the elite. He has peered into all of their eyes. And he always felt the same way, that something vital was missing, missing from all of their lives-including his.

Now as his soul is drawn into the eyes of Jesus, he senses he is touching the hem of a divine garment. The look in Jesus' eyes. The authority in his voice. Instead of dotting the I's a crossing the T's of the law, he speaks words of life.

A lifetime of studying and teaching the Word, and now Nicodemus is face-to-face with the Word made flesh.

He came in darkness. Now he stands in the illuminating presence of the Light of the World. He is this close to the kingdom of God, at the very gate. And as the words of life cascade from Jesus' lips, he realizes this is he of whom the Prophets spoke.

Jesus' words draw him in and yet confuse him. What could Jesus mean when he says, "*No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again?*" How can be born of both water and Spirit?

And yet, Nicodemus can sense the power of God's Spirit in Jesus' words. "*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.*" A spark touches the far edges of his soul, but it is a slow burn. For Nicodemus is a careful man. And he has much to lose.

Some believe immediately. Others take years. For Nicodemus, it would take more than two years for that spark to fully ignite. It is the religious that often have the hardest time truly believing.

Still, an ember has fallen into his heart. An ember that tragedy will someday fan to a full blaze of faith. And it will be this tragedy that brings Nicodemus out of the shadows to the side of the Savior... in the full light of day. On that day, Nicodemus will see Jesus as much more than just a rabbi, a teacher, but will know him as Savior.

That's the story of Nicodemus. It is this very personal and private encounter with Jesus that gives us what is perhaps the most well-known verse in all of Scripture – John 3:16. We know little else about him.

There is a tradition that says Nicodemus actually testified in defense of Jesus in the trial before Pontius Pilate, although there is zero evidence to back this up. This tradition also tells us that Nicodemus was expelled from his position on the Jewish ruling council because of his support of Jesus and that he was later baptized by Peter and John. The problem is we have no historical information to back this up. It doesn't mean it didn't happen, but there is no proof that it did happen, so all we have to go on is what is reported to us in the Gospel of John.

So what life lessons can we take away from Nicodemus and his seeking out Jesus in the middle of the night and the truth bombs that Jesus drops on this Jewish leader of power and prestige?

### **Jesus Isn't Impressed by Your Credentials**

The first is this. Jesus isn't impressed by your credentials. Nicodemus' position and title alone made him one of the most influential men in all of Israel. In modern terms, he has the most followers on X. His podcast is the most listened to. His books sit at the top of the Jerusalem Times bestseller list.

Anyone else would have been wowed by his presence. Anyone else would have sought his opinion, would have been intimidated by the fact that he was the one asking questions and worried about getting the answers right. But not Jesus. Jesus didn't care about Nicodemus' resume. He was undaunted by his powerful position. Nicodemus needed to know the truth just like anyone else. The kingdom of God is open to everyone, but there is no one who gets special access, no matter their credentials.

Let me tease this out for us this morning. No one here is a Pharisee. No one here sits on the Sanhedrin, so I don't want us to miss the application for our lives. Jesus isn't impressed by your religious accomplishments. He isn't impressed by which church you attend, or what ministries you serve in, or how much influence you have in the church.

But Nicodemus position and title didn't just bring about religious prestige. It brought wealth and power. So I think we can extrapolate a little more here. Jesus isn't impressed by your degree. He doesn't care what school you went to. Jesus isn't impressed by your job title. He doesn't care what position you hold. Jesus isn't impressed by your income. He doesn't care how much money you have in the bank. Jesus isn't impressed by your influence. He doesn't care how many social media followers and friends you have.

If you want to follow Him, that includes all of those things. He will use all of those things. You might have to give them up, or He might give them a new purpose. But there is no one who can pull a "don't-you-know-who-I-am" with Jesus. As Mark Moore shares in our Quest 52 book, "You cannot buy your way into the kingdom or bully your way past faith. Neither fame nor fortune can substitute for submission to Jesus."

### **It's Not Enough to be a Secret Follower of Jesus**

The second take home is this – It's not enough to be a secret follower of Jesus. Nicodemus approached Jesus under the cover of darkness. It's obvious Jesus' words had an impact on him. In John 7, he spoke up in defense of Jesus insisting he get a fair trial, instead of the kangaroo court the religious leaders were giving him.

I disagree with Mark Moore at this point in the Quest 52 book. He seems to suggest that Nicodemus always remained a secret disciple of Jesus, and thus his faith fell short of saving faith. However, I am of the opinion that Nicodemus had a faith that when push came to shove, he was forced out of the shadows into the light.

He is the one he helped bury Jesus. He provided and prepared the traditional spices to give Jesus a proper burial. That wasn't a secret act. It would have been known. And Nicodemus was stepping out from the shadows to do this at a point when all of his disciples were in hiding.

Although Mark's point remains true. You can't draw close to Jesus without coming out of the closet. You can't get married and keep your ring in your pocket. You can't be in a relationship without updating your status on social media. As Mark Moore writes in the book, "True devotion requires declaration." He's right about that.

Maybe you've been trying to follow Jesus in the shadows. You believe, but you believe quietly. No need to make a big deal about it. You come to church on Sunday, but you go to work on Monday. You go to school on Monday, wait, you don't go to school on Mondays anymore, you go to school on Tuesday, and you keep your faith quiet. You don't want to look weird. You don't want to be thought of as one of those religious kooks. Believe me, I get it. I don't want to look like a lot of those religious kooks either.

You should try being a preacher. I meet people, and they treat me like a normal person and we get along great, until the inevitable question comes up, "What do you do for a living?" I often

don't volunteer that until I have to, because so often people treat me completely different after they find out I'm a preacher. They pull back and withdraw. On the one hand I want them to know that I'm a normal person, on the other hand I feel like I have to apologize for all those other preachers out there who give us a bad name.

I understand your desire to remain in the shadows. Some of us, like Nicodemus want to come to Jesus, but we only do it at night. We only do it when we're not going to be found out. We only do it in ways that don't make us stick out.

And yet a real relationship with Jesus requires that at some point you step out from the shadows and step into the light. Jesus' final words to Nicodemus are these in verse 21, *"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."*

Eventually, Nicodemus left the cover of darkness and stepped into the light. Perhaps the time has come for you to take your faith from the shadows, and step into the light. It's time to openly identify yourself with Jesus. Jesus is MY Lord. Jesus is MY Savior. Jesus is the lover of MY soul.

Jesus has a plan for your life, and that plan involves more than Sunday morning. His involves the whole of your life. All of your life. Will you be His follower today? Openly. Publically. Not just on Sundays, but on Mondays at 9 am. Fridays at 10:00 pm. Saturdays at noon.

Jesus says in Matthew 10:32, *"Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven."* The time comes in every life where you have to make a choice about who Jesus really is and what that really means for your life.

#### PRAYER

Dearest Lord Jesus,

Thank you for being such a good teacher. For giving me simple illustrations of profound truths. Thank you for being so direct, for not skirting the hard questions. And thank you for answers, even though at times I am slow to grasp them.

Thank you for being such a willing teacher. Willing to go anywhere to a Samaritan well or to a Damascus road. Willing to meet anyone-Pharisee or prostitute. Willing to go anytime at noon or at night.

Thank you that I can come and bring my doubts, as did Thomas; my fears, as did Joseph of Arimathea; my shame, as did the woman caught in adultery; my questions, as did Nicodemus.

Thank you for the time you met with me at night, when you told me the bad news that I stood outside the gates of your kingdom. And the good news, that all I would have to do to enter would be to take a step of faith out of the darkness and into your light.

I confess, there are times when I have loved the darkness more than the light. Even as your child. And even now, there are times I walk along gray borders, flirting with the enticing shadows cast by the world. There have been times I have made this world not a brighter place but a darker one. By my thoughts. By my words. By my deeds. For all these shameful times I have been an unworthy subject, forgive me, I pray, O most worthy King.

Help me to walk in the light as you yourself are in the light. Where there is darkness, let me be a beacon of light. And if not a beacon, a torch. And if not a torch, a candle. And if not a candle, then at least a spark to ignite others.

O Lord, may I never be ashamed of you or of being seen with you or of being associated with you in any way. "Sooner far," as the hymn says, "let evening blush to own a star. But may this my glory be, that you are not ashamed of me...."