

## ***The Church of the Servant King***

### ***Survey of the Bible Series – The Gospel of John (SB\_JN3A\_The Story of Nicodemus)***

#### **Introduction**

Nicodemus represented the best in Israel. He was a Pharisee, thus he was devoted to the Scriptures and held them in high regard. As we've seen in the past, the Pharisees were a non-priestly group, generally learned, committed to the oral traditions, and concerned with developing *Halakah* (rules of conduct based on deductions from the law). The Pharisees in the Sanhedrin were laymen in the sense that they were not priests; however, many of them were scribes (i.e. teachers of the law) and thus different from the elders. Both the Pharisees and the Sadducees arose from the ranks of the scribes and priests of Israel after the Babylonian captivity (i.e. after the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem in 516 BC). The Pharisees believed in the immortality of the soul through a resurrection. They also believed in the existence of angels and the providential sovereignty of God.<sup>1</sup>

John affirms that Nicodemus was a teacher in verse 10 which is consistent with the background of the Pharisees as scribes. Scribes probably had their origin as the king's secretaries under David and Solomon (2 Sam 8:17; 20:25; 1 Ki 4:3; 2 Ki 12:10). Later, Hezekiah supported the growth of a body of men whose task was to transcribe old records or to put in writing that which had been passed down orally (Prov 25:1). Under Hezekiah, the title "scribe" began to convey more significance than just the king's secretary. They began to be seen as a class of students and interpreters of the law who boasted of their wisdom (Jer 8:8).<sup>2</sup>

In addition, Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin Council. The Sanhedrin was a Jewish council that arose during the Hellenizing period of Jewish history and was translated into a form of puppet rule under Rome responsible for civil order. The Sanhedrin included both Pharisees and Sadducees (Acts 23:6) and elders.<sup>3</sup>

It was the Sanhedrin Council that played a major role in putting Jesus on trial (Lk 22:66). However, Nicodemus rebuked the other Pharisees for condemning Jesus without hearing Him (Jn 7:50-51). Nicodemus also assisted another member of the Sanhedrin Council with the burial of Jesus. (See Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus in John 19:38-39).

John's account allows us to see the development of character in these two exceptions within the Sanhedrin Council. Basically, Nicodemus (like Joseph of Arimathea) were men who, because of their devotion to the Scriptures, became members of a religious body within Israel. They developed relationships within that body, but no doubt, because of their interest in discerning the spirit and not just the letter of the Law, came to be seen as out of step with the corrupt nature and direction of the larger segment of the Council. Nevertheless, they continued to affiliate with the Council and to remain subject to its influence. John states that Joseph of Arimathea was even a disciple of Jesus, "but secretly, for fear of the Jews" (Jn 19:38). Perhaps this is the reason that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night (Jn 3:1). Nicodemus was not a believer the night that the events of chapter 3 took place; however, as he pondered the words of Christ to him and observed Jesus' life and death, I believe that no one but a believer would have performed the deeds that he

---

<sup>1</sup> Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1988), 997-8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1141-43.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1126-28.

performed in association with the burial of Jesus, i.e. the purchase of 100 pounds of a mixture of myrrh and aloes (Jn 19:39) – enough to cover Jesus' entire body.

**Principle:** Early in Jesus' public ministry, these men (even though Nicodemus was likely an unbeliever at the time of this encounter) represent the immature believer who has not grown enough in faith to be unconditionally yielded to the plan of God for his/her life. As a believer grows toward spiritual maturity in knowledge and application, that believer soon realizes that there is no compromise with the world, the flesh, or Satan's main vehicle of deception – religion.

Jesus' teaching recorded in Luke 9:23 – “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself [*the opposite of Cosmic 1 arrogance*], and take up his cross daily and follow Me” – is an example of this principle. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus represent the fact that this principle works its way out in a yielded believer's life in a progressive manner as that believer's perception of reality changes from a worldly basis founded in empiricism and rationalism to a spiritual basis founded in faith. The mature believer, who has been through this process, knows that there is no basis for arrogance as he/she observes the immature believer. The mature believer possesses a heart [mind, spirit] like God's and desires to assist the weaker brother to the extent that there is positive volition.

### The Story of Nicodemus (3:1-21)

Nicodemus went to Jesus at night. The reason is not stated although there could have been any one or a combination of reasons including fear or he wanted a time of uninterrupted conversation without the crowds. Nicodemus was intrigued and curious to discern what made Jesus tick. He wondered if Jesus was for real. The true nature of Nicodemus' curiosity unfolds later in the Gospel when we see Nicodemus pleading with other Pharisees for fairness according to the standards of the Law to judge Jesus (Jn 7:50-51). Also, we see Nicodemus with Joseph of Arimathea taking care of Jesus' burial after His crucifixion.

**Principle:** Curiosity regarding spiritual matters is an essential characteristic of positive volition. See Moses with the burning bush (Ex 3:3-4), the Queen of Sheba's visit of Solomon (1 Ki 10:1-13), Solomon's teaching in the Proverbs (Pro 2:3-4), and the Ethiopian eunuch's encounter with Philip (Acts 8:26-40) as examples. If there is no curiosity with no measures taken in one's life to acquire a deeper understanding of spiritual Truth, there is no positive volition.

**Principle:** Positive volition seeks answers by asking questions. No questions – spiritual lethargy, spiritual dullness, and spiritual apathy. Questions – evidence of a soul seeking a deeper understanding.

At this point, Nicodemus was not likely a believer since his choice of words to address Jesus seem to indicate that he had not concluded that Jesus was the Messiah and Son of God. He uses the term “Rabbi” (teacher) to address Jesus instead of “Lord” thereby speaking to Him as an equal. The signs had pointed to Jesus as God's man and Nicodemus wanted to speak to Jesus as one Rabbi to another.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus cuts to the heart of the issue with Nicodemus and avoids the necessity of dealing with further flattery from him. The Greek word translated “again” can either mean “from above” or “anew.” The kingdom was very prominent in the thinking of any religious Jew during Jesus' public ministry. Israel longed for the kingdom ruled by the Messiah Who would replace Rome. Jesus quickly addresses the real issue to a Jewish person who lived within the dispensation of the Age of Israel. The gospel content was “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 10:7) and was directed specifically to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:6). Jesus clearly explains to

---

<sup>4</sup> Edwin A. Blum, “John,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, editors (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1983), 281.

Nicodemus, a Jew and one of the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” that a spiritual renewal from above or a spiritual rebirth is necessary to enter this kingdom.

The spiritual renewal to which Jesus referred is an act by which God imparts spiritual life to one who trusts Christ (Titus 3:5). Jesus’ teaching in this passage contains a principle that connects believers of all dispensations, i.e. trust or belief in Jesus as the promised Messiah and Savior of man. Believers of all dispensations will rule and reign in their resurrection bodies with Jesus during the Messianic kingdom. Spiritual rebirth results from trusting in Christ and Jesus states that only those who have been spiritually reborn can enter the kingdom. Thus, trust in Christ is necessary to enter the kingdom regardless of dispensation.

Without spiritual rebirth, we are left to the perceptive abilities of the flesh which are effective and necessary to deal with the exigencies of this life, but not spiritual matters. Rationalism and empiricism cannot process and understand the unseen spiritual reality that flows like an undercurrent throughout the course of pre-history (eternity past), human history, and post-history (eternity future). Spiritual rebirth is the first step in the transformation of one’s mind from orientation to the world’s priorities to orientation to God’s priorities in life.

Nicodemus demonstrates his lack of perceptive ability of spiritual matters through his question and comments in verses 4 & 9. Jesus has to explain the most elementary truths to one who is a teacher of Israel (v. 10). Thus, Nicodemus, as an unbeliever at this point in his life, illustrates the principle taught by Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:10, 13-16.

For to us God revealed them [spiritual wisdom of verses 5-9] through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. (1 Co 2:10)

Each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? (1 Co 2:13-16)

In verses 5-8, Jesus teaches the principle again to Nicodemus; however, this time Jesus elaborates with an illustration. Also, Jesus adds that a man must be born “of water and the Spirit.” What did Jesus mean when He said that a man must be born of both “water” and the “Spirit?” There have been several explanations of this statement:

- Sacramentarians (those who believe that salvation is in some way connected to the sacraments which include water baptism) use this statement to argue for baptismal regeneration.
  - This is a stretch to say the least. In the context, Jesus is arguing against anything in the physical, material world to be capable of producing spiritual life.
  - Also, water baptism isn’t a part of the context of the passage.
  - This is a clear case of eisegesis since this explanation contradicts clear teaching in Scripture that salvation is by faith alone (see Jn 3:16, 36; Eph 2:8-9; Tit 3:5).
- Some interpret the water element of this statement to be a reference to the water in which the fetus lives in the womb.
  - This point has some merit in context since it fits well with Nicodemus’ question in verse 4 – “Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”
  - On the other hand, Jesus’ statement that one must be born of water is akin to saying something to the effect of “if one is a human.”
- Water is used by Jesus in a figurative sense to represent the cleansing operation of the Word of God in one’s life.
  - Jesus uses a similar figurative reference to water in John 4:10-14 when He tells the woman at the well that He would give her “living water.”

- Jesus uses a similar figurative reference to water in John 7:38 when He states that “rivers of living water” would flow out of those who believed in Him.
- Water is used by Paul in Ephesians 5:26 to represent the cleansing operation of the Word of God – “cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word.
- Peter refers to being born again, not of corruptible seed, but by the Word of God (1 Pe 1:23).
- In our passage (Jn 3:5), the words “water” and “Spirit” are connected by the Greek word “kai” which can be translated “even” depending upon the construction of the phrase.
- In our passage (Jn 3:5), “water” and “Spirit” are without the definite article in the Greek. Sometimes, this construction is referred to as a “hendiadys” which is the use of two words connected by a conjunction to express the same idea as a single word with a qualifier. In this verse, the sense of this Greek construction would render the translation – “Except a man be born of water, even spiritual water.”<sup>5</sup>
- Water is used in this passage to refer to the Holy Spirit
  - In John 7:38, Jesus states that “rivers of living water” would flow out of those who believed in Him. In the next verse, John indicates that Jesus was referring to the Holy Spirit.
- The “water” refers to the repentance ministry of John the Baptist and the “Spirit” refers to the application of the Holy Spirit by Christ to an individual.
  - While there is nothing inherently wrong with this interpretation, it doesn’t seem to be supported by the context.

I believe that any one of the interpretations of “water” in this passage as a reference to: 1) the cleansing ministry of the Word; 2) the Holy Spirit; or 3) the water of the womb is acceptable and supported by context. In fact, Jesus may have intentionally used water in view of Nicodemus’ question in verse 4 in a manner to convey a double meaning, i.e. an emphasis upon the spiritual (“water, even the Spirit”) as a word play on top of the water associated with the womb in physical birth. After all, Jesus possessed a sharp intellect capable of wit.

In verse 7, the word “you” is plural. Jesus uses the plural because in verse 2 Nicodemus used the word “we” most likely in reference to the Sanhedrin Council. Jesus used the plural to refer to all who Nicodemus represented.

In verses 7-8, Jesus uses an analogy to the physical realm to illustrate a spiritual principle. The word wind and the word spirit are identical in the. When the wind blows, you can hear the sound it makes but you cannot discern its origin or its destination because it is invisible. In like manner, you cannot see how the Spirit operates any more than you can see how the wind blows. However, the wind and the Spirit both have definite effect in their respective realms.

Nicodemus, as a teacher of Israel, should have known the spiritual truths to which Jesus referred. The Hebrew prophets spoke of a new Age (the Messianic kingdom) in which the Holy Spirit would have a ministry unknown to that point in Israel’s history (see Isa 32:15; Exek 36:25-27; Joel 2:28-29). A teacher of Israel should have understood these passages as well as the principle that God could spiritually regenerate an individual (1 Sam 10:6; Jer 31:33).

In verse 11, Jesus again addressed Nicodemus with the plural “you” as in “you do not receive.” Jesus was obviously reprimanding the group of religious leaders that Nicodemus represented. Nicodemus could not believe heavenly things such as the purpose of Jesus’ death, resurrection, and glorification because his eyes were fixed on the here and now.

---

<sup>5</sup> Charles F. Baker, *Understanding the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Grace Publications, 1978), 50.

No one has gone into heaven and then come to earth with clear teaching about divine matters. The one exception is Jesus who is the Son of man (1:50-51 cf. Dan 7:13; Matt 26:64). He is the ladder between heaven and earth with access to both realms (Jn 1:50-51). John, the Gospel writer, establishes a clear connection between Jesus' teaching to Nicodemus and John's own introduction to his Gospel. Jesus was and is the incarnate Son of God.

In verse 14, Jesus makes a statement to Nicodemus that must have haunted Nicodemus as Nicodemus reflected upon it in future times. No doubt, this statement played a huge role in convincing Nicodemus that Jesus was the Messiah Who fulfilled Old Testament prophecies such as Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 through His death. When Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, those who looked at it lived (see Num 21:9). In the same manner, those who look to the work of Jesus as the Messiah on the Cross will live spiritually. Again, Jesus provides an analogy between the physical and the spiritual realms.

In verses 15-21, John emphasizes truths using simple Greek words that are profound in their meaning. I shall emphasize only a few even though we could spend an entire lesson on the remaining verses.

- ❑ Verse 16 – “only begotten” [monogenes] really means “one and only” or “only born one” or “uniquely born one.” This has reference to the incarnation of the Son of God as a man.
- ❑ Verse 16 – “God so loved the world” and “whoever” indicates that the gift of His Son is for the entire human race, not just a select few.
- ❑ Verse 17 – God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but the world might be saved. Note the distinction between Christ's first advent and second advent. Note also the emphasis upon volition. God desires that everyone be saved (1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pe 3:9).
- ❑ John continues to build upon a theme of the contrast between light and darkness that he introduced in 1:4-9. He continues to use that theme even in his epistles – e.g. 1 John 1:5.