

Ps 121; Gen 12:1-4a; Ro 4:1-5, 13-17; Jn 3:1-17

Nicodemus & Jesus What is This New Birth?

Our old friend Nicodemus reminds us that nobody is a lost cause. He is an important church leader, keeping to the shadows in the streets of Jerusalem. Nick served in the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling body that meets in that city. Jesus was in town for the Passover. Nicodemus comes to visit Jesus at night. Doesn't want to be seen. With all his learning, wealth and political power, this religious leader needs something. He keeps thinking in material, literal terms, while Jesus embodies spiritual truth. The Lord tells Nicodemus, "Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit." (v 6)

There are few places in the Gospel where Jesus speaks to one person standing before Him. Mostly, He speaks to the crowds – large and small. He spoke to the Samaritan woman by the well of Sychar. He spoke one-on-one with Pilate. But during His time on earth, Jesus was a preacher, as I read it – not an individual spiritual director. These words to the Pharisee – are rare and precious personal words. Jesus sees that the

Pharisee understands the divine character of the signs Jesus performs, but Nick is like his fellow Israelites looking for a political leader—not a spiritual leader.

We don't get to hear Nick's answer to the Lord Jesus. We see most importantly the character and the will of God. It seems Nicodemus makes his way back home under cover of darkness with a lot to think about. He has learned things this evening with Jesus he never thought about in Pharisee school.

We see Nicodemus only in John's Gospel. First in this nighttime conversation. Next in the Sanhedrin controversy, because Jesus was seen at the fall festival of booths (7:37-52), the temple guards reported it to the leaders. The leaders of the temple were looking for any excuse to arrest Him. In that Sanhedrin scene where the temple police tell the leadership that Jesus' is in town, Nicodemus spoke in Jesus' favor. He told the council, "Our Law does not judge a man unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing, does it?" (Jn 7:51) Nicodemus believes in justice – and more importantly, speaks up for justice when

it is unpopular to do so. We see that Nick has begun to believe in Jesus.

We learn in Genesis that Abraham (Abram) had been walking with God for some time when the Lord came to him in a vision. Abraham reminds God that there has been no child born. How can a man become a great nation if he has no heir? God takes Abraham outside and tells him to look up at the stars – and to count them if he is able. God says, “So shall your descendants be.” That night, “...he believed in the Lord, and He (that is God) accounted it to him as righteousness.” (Gen 15:6) Abraham’s trust and belief grow – as God pours out grace upon him. His faith is accounted as rightness – or righteousness. In a similar way Jesus opens up understanding by speaking to Nick in analogies: the ceremonial washing with water in sacrifice and worship (born by water and the Spirit – v 5), the raising of the bronze snake by Moses for healing (v 14). Nicodemus understood his relationship to Abraham as coming through Moses – the lawgiver. It seems he had never made any connection that Abraham was transformed by God on account of his faith.

Nicodemus, the religious leader, considered himself a true son of Abraham. Jesus the man is also a son of Abraham. Both Nicodemus and Jesus are familiar with this Genesis passage we heard this morning. Nicodemus was an expert in the covenants, especially this one God made with Abraham. But Jesus, eternally alive knows that chapter of history firsthand. He was there at the creation – and Jesus was there when visitors came to Abraham to announce the birth of Isaac, Abraham’s son. Some even believe Jesus was among this group of three men (or angels) who came to Abraham under the oak trees at Mamre. (Gen 18) But Nick has only ever seen the genealogical relationship to Abraham that comes from his identity as an Israelite. He would call him Father Abraham – perhaps never even thinking of him as our spiritual father.

After Jesus explains “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not die, but have everlasting life,” Nick’s heart was full. But Jesus doesn’t stop there. He goes on to separate what has been accomplished by God’s gracious will entirely from the work of the Law. Old Covenant – New

Covenant. Physical birth – New Birth. Jesus tells Nicodemus, “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.” (v 17) Nicodemus’ whole ministry and calling is about the Law. His work in the Sanhedrin rarely involves mercy and grace. They were in the judging business. They had judged this rabbi from Nazareth to be a blasphemer. Jesus teaches that salvation is by grace through faith. This is how we are reborn. We are given New Life in Messiah Jesus. The water of baptism is a symbol of the Holy Spirit’s work in the believer.

Fast forward to the year 33 AD. In a time of turmoil, confusion and grief, when Jesus had been removed from the cross of crucifixion by His disciples and friends, Nicodemus appears again. He and Joseph of Arimathea offer comfort and support to Jesus’ family.

John tells us, “Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds *weight*.” (Jn 19:31) Nicodemus is a rich man. This gift is very costly. Gone is Nick’s fear of unpopularity and the contempt of his learned

colleagues. He came with burial spices because he understood Jesus had accomplished a mighty work in his own heart and mind. He had the hope that Messiah was in the world.

In the disappointment and grief of Jesus' burial, Nicodemus did not yet understand that the greatest miracle of all time was just three days away! Amen.