

It May Hurt, but This Is the Only Way Jesus Can Set You Free From Fear

Much is made of the fact that Nicodemus “came to Jesus by night.” In my opinion, it is much ado about nothing. John’s Gospel mentions his nocturnal meeting with Jesus three times. This minor detail has become an unfair stigma to an otherwise honorable man. The perception is that Nicodemus met secretly with Jesus under the cloak of darkness, so he wouldn’t get caught associating with the controversial preacher and ruin his reputation. Don’t brand him a coward just yet.

Give Nicodemus some credit. After all, he sought out Jesus, not vice versa. Can we honestly say that we are aggressively seeking after God? Or are we passively waiting for Him to initiate contact with us? Nicodemus discovered first hand that God “is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Heb. 11:6). Perhaps Nicodemus met Jesus at nighttime for a very logical reason—they were both busy during the day! Jesus was occupied traveling and ministering to the masses, while Nicodemus had many duties as a Pharisee in the Sanhedrin Court. Maybe it was the best time for them to have a conversation without being interrupted. Could it be that Nicodemus had such a hunger for truth that he couldn’t wait until the next morning, he had to talk to Jesus that night? Whatever the reason(s), he had a life-changing encounter.

As a distinguished ruler of the Jews, Nicodemus knew everything there was to know about the Mosaic Law and Judaism, but he didn’t know God personally through His Son Jesus yet. Nicodemus was one of the most religious people in Israel. He had it all—position, power, prestige, prosperity, but still something was missing.

Here we see that our social, economic, educational, ethnic and religious pedigree is meaningless when it comes to right standing with God. The circumstances surrounding our first birth are totally irrelevant. What matters is that we are truly "born again." Keeping the tenants of any religion cannot make us righteous. Only faith in Jesus renders a person saved and an heir of eternal life (John 3:3, 5, 16-18). If being religious was a free ticket to heaven, Nicodemus would have been the ideal candidate. But Jesus told this extremely religious man, not some rank sinner, "You *must* be born again" (John 3:7).

The new birth is essential because it is a supernatural act of God whereby we are made new creatures. It is not a superhuman act of man. One meaning of Nicodemus' name is "innocent blood." This is significant because he learned that the new birth results from faith in the "innocent blood" of Jesus (John 3:14-16).

Bible commentator Herbert Lockyer noted, "Regeneration (the new birth) is not an improvement of the old nature but the impartation of a new nature." At a political rally years ago, a socialist speaker predicted, "Socialism will put a new coat on every man." A recently converted Christian in the audience shouted back, "Socialism might put a new coat on a man, but Jesus Christ will put a new man in the coat!"

The gospel message can be expressed in a simple, eight-word nutshell—"Born once, die twice; born twice, die once." In other words, if we are only born of our biological parents, we will face both physical and spiritual death (Rev. 20:12-14). However, if we are born naturally and then born again of the Spirit, we will only experience physical death should Jesus tarry. The old saying is true, "Better never to have been born, than never to have been born again."

Nicodemus obviously admired Jesus, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher who has come from God. For no one can do these

signs that You do unless God is with him" (John 3:2). "Rabbi" was an official title of honor given by Jews to a doctor of the Law meaning "my teacher" or "master." Jesus earned this title by His educational and teaching credentials, not just by virtue of being the Son of God. Remember, He confounded the doctors in the Temple at His *bar mitzvah* when He was 12. Furthermore, Jesus regularly read the scrolls in His home synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:15-17). Although raised as a carpenter's son, He was not ignorant or illiterate. To the contrary, He astounded people with His wisdom, knowledge, preaching and miracles.

When a debate broke out over whether Jesus was a prophet, Nicodemus rushed to His defense, "Nicodemus, being one of them who came to Jesus by night, said to them, "Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?" (John 7:50-51). The point is, we cannot remain neutral. Eventually, we will either courageously stand up for Christ or cowardly deny Him. Love, like a cough, is hard to hide. Even if Nicodemus initially came to Jesus by night to avoid detection, later he could no longer conceal his loyalty. He clearly became a vocal convert of Christ, even among his peers.

Ironically, when Jesus was crucified, His closest disciples hid in fear while other "secret disciples" came out of the shadows. Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus came forward to perform a generous service for Jesus—they embalmed and buried His body in Joseph's unused tomb (John 19:38-42). You see, it's impossible to be a secret disciple for long because, as William Barclay put it, "Either the discipleship kills the secrecy, or the secrecy kills the discipleship." With all the strange people "coming out of the closet" these days, we need true Christians to come out of their prayer closet and boldly stand for Christ and make an impact on our society for God.

While Nicodemus helped embalm and bury Jesus, Herbert Lockyer observed that, "Mary gave her spices to Jesus while He was

alive.” In effect, Mary’s one pound of ointment (John 12:3) outweighed the 100 pounds of spices used by Nicodemus on Jesus (John 19:39) because a dead body can’t appreciate the attention it’s given. He opened his wallet after Jesus died, wishing he’d done more for Him while He was still alive. Too often people give to God out of a belated sense of regret. When they hit rock bottom or realize death is near, they make generous donations or try to redeem themselves with a few final good works. Instead, we should daily give God our best lest we are forced to give God our leftovers.

Some sources suggest that Nicodemus presented testimony in favor of Jesus at His trial before Pilate. According to Christian tradition, “Nicodemus was baptized by Peter and John, suffered persecution from hostile Jews, lost his membership in the Sanhedrin, and was forced to leave Jerusalem because of his Christian faith.” In summary, “Nick at Night” embraced the light. He initially came to Jesus by night, but it’s obvious by his actions that he was truly transformed into a child of the day! {eoa}

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