

Jesus' Encounter with a Religious Leader

John 3:1 [NIV] *“Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council.”*

For the most part we see Jesus surrounded by the ordinary people, but on this occasion we see Him in contact with one of the aristocracy of Jerusalem.

There are certain things we know about Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was wealthy.

John 19:39 [NIV] *“He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds.”*

Only a wealthy man could have bought that amount of myrrh and aloes.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee.

In many ways the Pharisees were the best people in the whole country. They were a brotherhood which was entered into by taking a pledge in front of three witnesses that they would spend all their lives observing every detail of the scribal law.

What did this mean?

To a Jew the law given in the first five books of the Old Testament was the perfect law of God and contained everything a human needed to know for the living of a good life.

This law as it stands consists of great, wide, noble principles which have to be applied to everyday living.

It was the work of the Scribes to take one of these principles stated in the law and produce by-laws and regulations that would cover every conceivable situation in life.

These by-laws [scribal laws] numbered many thousand.

It was to every one of these scribal laws that a Pharisee dedicated his life to keep.

The name Pharisee means *“the separated one”* and the Pharisees did just that, separated themselves from all ordinary life in order to keep every detail of the law of the Scribes.

For Nicodemus as a Pharisee it was an astonishing thing that he should wish to speak to Jesus Christ at all.

Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews.

A member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jews.

Under Roman control the Sanhedrin's power was more limited than it had been before the Roman conquest, but it was still extensive.

Again it is clear that it is amazing that Nicodemus should come to Jesus at all.

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night.

Two possible reasons:

A sign of caution, Nicodemus may **not** have wished to commit himself by coming to Jesus by day when all the crowds surrounded Jesus.

But don't condemn Nicodemus, it was a miracle of grace, to overcome his background prejudices, upbringing and his whole view of life enough to come to Jesus at all.

Nicodemus may have wanted an absolutely private and undisturbed time with Jesus.

Rabbis declared that the best time to study the law was at night when a person would be undisturbed.

Nicodemus was a puzzled man.

A man who had all the honours of life yet felt there was something lacking.

Many people today in this materialist and pleasure-filled world have the same feeling that there is a void in life they cannot fill.

John 3:2 [NIV] *“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.”*

Nicodemus had seen the signs and wonders Jesus did and as a result considered Him to be a teacher and inspired by God.

John 3:3 [NIV] *“In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”*

Jesus' answer to this statement on the surface is difficult to understand.

Jesus was saying that signs and wonders were **not** the important things, only a change in a person's inner life was important.

This change had to be so extensive that it was **like a new birth**.

Literally starting our lives all over again with new principles and thoughts.

The Greek word translated “*again*” is “*anōthen*” is used in three ways.

- a) From the beginning, completely radically
- b) Again, the second time
- c) From above, therefore from God.

John 3:4 [NIV] *“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!”*

Nicodemus thought Jesus meant a second physical birth, an impossible thing.

John 3:5 [NIV] *“Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is **born of water and the Spirit.**”*

Jesus is referring to two births, our physical birth when water is involved [a woman's water breaks just before she gives birth], or our baptism immersed completely in water as outward sign of repentance, [**Romans 6:1-4**].

The second birth is the work of the Holy Spirit.

John 3:6 [NIV] *“Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.”*

Christ is reminding us that a human is flesh and our power is limited to what we can do in the flesh. This will lead to defeating frustration, we have all experienced this in our lives.

But we need to be born again, this time of the Spirit.

As the Holy Spirit takes control of our lives the Holy Spirit in us does what only the Holy Spirit can do.

The defeated and frustrated life of enslavement to human nature gives way to a victorious life with God.

This change takes place when we accept Jesus Christ as our only Saviour, being cleansed of sin by His sacrificial blood, our past is forgiven and we are then empowered for the future by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Four things happen to us at that moment of accepting Jesus Christ in our lives:

- 1 We can truly accept the will of God in our lives.** His will becomes paramount in our decisions and choices.
- 2 We become a citizen of the Kingdom of God.**
- 3 We became a child of God.**
- 4 We enter into eternal life.**

This phrase *“born again”*, this idea of *“rebirth”*, runs all through the New Testament teaching.

[1 Peter 1:3 – 1 Peter 1:22-23 – James 1:18 – Titus 3:5 – Romans 6:1-11 – 1 Corinthians 3:1-2 – 2 Corinthians 5:17 – Galatians 6:15 – Ephesians 4:22-24 – Hebrews 5:12-14]

John 3:7(a) [Message Bible] *“Jesus said, ‘You’re not listening. Let Me say it again.’”*

John 3:7(b) [NIV] *“You must be born again.”*

Jesus then helps us understand what He was saying to be *“born of the spirit.”*

John 3:8 [Message Bible] *“You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it is headed next. That’s the way it is with every one born from above by the wind of God, the Holy Spirit of God.”*

John 3:9 [NIV] *“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.”*

Nicodemus still did **not** understand what Jesus was teaching.

There are two kinds of misunderstanding of the teaching of Jesus Christ.

- 1 The person who has not yet reached the stage of knowledge or of experience at which they can understand** a certain truth spoken by Christ, or spoken by the Holy Spirit through the apostles as recorded in their letters.

John 14:25-26 [NIV] *“All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”*

This new understanding of Christ's teaching and the applying it to each generation and culture is the work of the Holy Spirit.

It is the church elders' responsibility to allow the Holy Spirit to speak through them to gradually clarify all of Christ's teaching.

2 But there is also a failure to understand which comes from an unwillingness to understand.

A person can deliberately shut their mind to truth they do **not** wish to see.

They can deliberately become dense towards teaching they do **not** wish to accept.

Nicodemus as a law-keeping Pharisee was like the latter.

John 3:10-12 [NIV] *"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?"*

The teaching about a new birth from God should **not** have been strange to Nicodemus as an expert in the scriptures, but a new heart had to be created in him.

[Ezekiel 18:31 – Ezekiel 36:26]

Again and again the prophets had spoken of the very experience of which Jesus was speaking.

If a person does **not** wish to experience this dramatic change of a new birth, they will deliberately shut their eyes, mind and heart to the Holy Spirit who only can enable them to be re-born.

Revelation 3:17-20 [NIV] *"You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so that you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so that you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so that you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me."*

Here we read of a group of professing Christians who were deliberately blinding themselves to the need for change, to experience a re-birth.

It is fatally easy to think that Christianity is something to be discussed and not as something to be experienced in a dramatic life-changing way, a new birth.

Jesus Christ then explains to Nicodemus the only way he ever will understand what Jesus is teaching.

John 3:13-21 [NIV] *"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.**"*

a) **Accept** Jesus Christ as our Saviour

- b) **Believe** in Jesus Christ's words and promises
- c) **Resist** the evil of sin
- d) **Walk** in the light of Christ's life and teaching

Nicodemus, because of his Jewish background, had difficulty in accepting the words of Jesus Christ straight away.

John 19:38-40 [NIV] *“Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate’s permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus’ body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs.”*

It is **not** recorded but maybe because Nicodemus had continued listening to Jesus Christ, as some Pharisees did, a change of heart and mind enabled him to openly be associate with the disciples of Jesus Christ.

All of us can experience a walk with Jesus Christ by meditating on His life and words recorded by those who were with Him before His death and after His resurrection.

Such a walk could cause the dramatic change of a new birth in our life.