



### Sermon Notes:

Preacher: Christopher Pepler

Text: John 3: 1-15

Title: Nicodemus at night

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Today, I am going to talk about a well-known character and text – Nicodemus (John 3: 1-15). We can relate to Nicodemus; this represents the thinking of many people today.

The Sanhedrin consisted of people of middle age to the elderly – the members of this elite group were influential and wealthy and they had a huge amount of influence and authority, (think of the NEC of the ANC). Nicodemus was also a Pharisee and teacher of the Law of Moses – he was a well-known theologian, perhaps the most eminent scholar in Jerusalem.

The Pharisees later became Jesus' enemies but this story is at the start of His ministry – they were talking about him and sent Nicodemus to check him out. Jesus was attending Passover and had been performing miracles in public... so the Pharisees wanted to find out what kind of a teacher/prophet he was. So Nicodemus arranged to meet Jesus at night at the home where he was staying – probably because that was the only time he could get Jesus alone.

He greeted Jesus as 'Rabbi' which was respectful and positioned them both as 'teachers': *"Rabbi, we (my fellow scholars and I) know that you are a teacher sent by God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him"* He had come to converse with Jesus about the things of the Kingdom of God. Jesus' response must have taken the wind out of his sails; *"I tell you the truth, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again"* Nicodemus must have been very confused and taken aback.

Here are some of the thoughts probably racing through his mind. ....

'Born again?' only used occasionally to refer to gentile converts, new-born ... 'But I am a Jew through and through!'

'I can't see/understand the Kingdom of God. But I am already born into the Kingdom... and what is more I am a famous Jewish theologian!'

'Surely any Jewish teacher would know that the Kingdom was for the nation of Israel, not for an individual'. (Personal salvation through spiritual rebirth would have been a foreign and incomprehensible idea).

'What in heaven's name is this man talking about?!'

Perhaps, in light of his confusion, it is easier to understand why this intelligent and mature man responded in such a superficial and materialistic way; *"How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born?"*

Let's pause here to ask and attempt to answer the first of two questions:

**1. WHY didn't Nicodemus understand what Jesus was saying?** ... by extension, why can't many people today not 'see' what Jesus says?

Firstly, Nicodemus was locked into a life-long religious paradigm – Jews are born into the Kingdom of God simply by being Jewish. Today – those brought up in some sort of 'Christian' family often think that they are therefore 'saved'.

Secondly, Nicodemus believed that Pharisees, like himself, had a privileged position in the Kingdom because of their knowledge of the Law of Moses. Today – Many believe that knowledge about Jesus, knowledge of the Bible, and living roughly in accordance with its moral and ethical teachings secures a privileged position in the Kingdom of God.

Thirdly, Nicodemus was by tradition and training a humanist – man-centred, mind and body centred with little room for the supernatural. Today – we live in an extremely humanistic society and our education system is totally humanistic – what we think and what we do (mind and body) is all there really is to reality.

I had to once address a management training session in my secular job some years ago, they were aware that I was a Christian, but the delegates were unable to conceive of the 'spirit' as anything other than a euphemism for 'mind'. This is also the position of much current theology – Dichotomy or Monism but not Trichotomy. Yet we are triune in the image of the triune God.

Consider the value we place on knowledge in the church.

Consider how we explain The Gospel! Make a decision for Christ.

Yet it is not what we know but who we know that really matters.

This superficial materialism, this humanism, is what Jesus addresses with Nicodemus, and what He is addressing today with us. <sup>5</sup>Jesus replied, "I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit." <sup>6</sup>Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. <sup>7</sup>So don't be surprised when I say, 'You must be born again.' <sup>8</sup>The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can't tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can't explain how people are born of the Spirit." (John 3:5-8). There are many interpretations regarding the "Water and Spirit issue, - do not focus on the water as in baptism, or John's repentance baptism, but focus on rebirth of the spirit.

Nicodemus must have been familiar with Ezekiel 36:25-27 'I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws'.

Now note how Jesus moves Nicodemus from 'see' (verses 3) to 'enter' (verse 5) – We cannot properly 'see' spiritual things until spiritually regenerated by the Holy Spirit, and we certainly cannot enter it unless we are born again. And this realisation leads Nicodemus to ask the second question I want us to consider today – Verse 9 'How can this be?' or better "How can this happen"

### **So, question two – HOW do we enter into the realm of the Spirit, the Kingdom of God?**

Is Nicodemus being dismissive and scornful? I don't think so. Is Jesus' response sarcastic or judgemental? No. He said; "You are Israel's teacher and you do not understand these things" with compassion.

Jesus then gives two decisive answers to the 'how can I enter' question.

Answer One – "11 I assure you, we tell you what we know and have seen, and yet you won't believe our testimony. 12 But if you don't believe me when I tell you about earthly things, how can you possibly believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ever gone to heaven and returned. But the Son of Man[e] has come down from heaven." (John 3: 11-13).

WE speak of what We know – Jesus now declaring truth as the representative of the triune Godhead on earth. But YOU... plural – includes all people, us too. Jesus is declaring that He is the source of truth, the beginning and the end in all matters... Therefore to enter the Kingdom of God, the realm of the Spirit, requires believing who Jesus is and believing what He says! Not believing in a religious system, tradition, esoteric philosophy, opinions... but in the Word of God made flesh – Jesus! You see '**God is Jesus!**' and if we want to encounter God we must encounter Jesus! He is the only way, truth, and life... and nobody comes to the triune godhead except through him!

I recently had to speed read two disturbing books promoting reincarnation and life between lives. Did Jesus support this hinduistic and new-age notion? No! The only real reference to Jesus in these books was to point out that not one of the thousands of Past Life Regression Hypnosis patients encountered Jesus in the life between lives. Should be called 'Lies between lies'

The second answer that Jesus gives Nicodemus, and us, to the 'how can I enter' question is in verse 14-15 where he uses an Old Testament type that would have been familiar to Nicodemus. "15 so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. (John 3: 15-15).

"4 Then the people of Israel set out from Mount Hor, taking the road to the Red Sea[a] to go around the land of Edom. But the people grew impatient with the long journey, 5 and they began to speak against God and Moses. "Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die here in the wilderness?" they complained. "There is nothing to eat here and nothing to drink. And we hate this horrible manna!" 6 So the Lord sent poisonous snakes among the people, and many were bitten and died. 7 Then the people came to Moses and cried out, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take away the snakes." So Moses prayed for the people. 8 Then the Lord told him, "Make a replica of a poisonous snake and attach it to a pole. All who are bitten will live if they simply look at it!" 9 So Moses made a snake out of bronze and attached it to a pole. Then anyone who was bitten by a snake could look at the bronze snake and be healed!" (Numbers 21:4-9). Rebellion and sin brought about their suffering and death – God healed any who looked to Him and His means of healing and trusted in Him. The snake on the pole

is a type of Jesus on the cross. The true bite of the serpent, Satan, is spiritual death, and healing is new spiritual life through Jesus Christ the saviour.

### So what then was Jesus saying to Nicodemus, and therefore to us?

To enter the Kingdom of God we must be born again spiritually, and for this to happen we need to (1) Believe who Jesus is and what He says, and (2) Look to Him ALONE in absolute believing dependence for the rebirth of our spirits. Nicodemus' question 'how can this happen?' was echoed later on the Day of Pentecost by at least 3,000 people who responded to Peter's message. 'When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles: Brothers, what shall we do?' (Acts 2: 37).

Consider some answers that both Jesus and Peter did NOT give to this question:

- Do nothing -you are already saved by being born into the faith at birth.
- Just repeat this little Sinners Prayer after me and invite Jesus into your heart.
- Make a commitment to live a better life.
- Study the Bible and when you know enough you will be saved.

No, instead Peter replied "*Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*" The gift of spiritual rebirth. What Jesus called being 'born again'.

**Why is his answer the only answer?** Because we are all born into this world spiritually dead and separated from God. We are dead men walking! We have an incurable spiritual condition and cannot know God, who is spirit, if we are spiritually dead! The only solution to our predicament is to be BORN AGAIN of the spirit, by the Holy Spirit. This is not a euphemism for 'change of mind', or 'commitment to live differently' or to 'know more'... it is a supernatural regeneration. And THIS is what Jesus was telling Nicodemus, and US today!

Before I end this message, I need to go one level deeper:

Jesus said that we need to 'believe him', who He is and what He says, and then He says we also need to 'believe IN Him'. To be IN Christ Jesus means to entrust all of your life completely to Him – For forgiveness of the rebellion of the PAST, for PRESENT meaning, and for FUTURE eternal life in His presence. **All of our lives.** IN Him is all or nothing thing – "Lord be my life. Be in me as I am in you." This transition from being in the world and self to being in Christ Jesus is through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. And **our response** to this wonderful work of God is to Repent, Ask, Receive, and Testify.

Let me close by answering one last question; 'What happened to Nicodemus – how did he respond?'

In John 7:50 we find him making a half-hearted appeal to the now antagonistic Pharisees to at least hear Jesus' own testimony. But, after Jesus was crucified we read in John 19:38-40 how he accompanied Joseph of Aramathia, described as a disciple of Jesus, to embalm Jesus' body – **an act of intimate devotion** performed not at night, but in the bright light of day; not in secret but in public.

So, how will you respond today to Jesus?