

COMMENTARY ON JOHN

LESSON NUMBER 28

John 3:1 "There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: 2 The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto Him, Rabbi, we know that Thou art a Teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that Thou doest, except God be with Him. 3 Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:1-3)

NICODEMUS COMES TO JESUS

INTRODUCTION

There is something about the real Jesus that attracts humble and contrite hearts. That attraction is more than simple curiosity, or the desire to know some new thing. This circumstance confirms there a spiritual drawing associated with Jesus that cannot be detected by "natural man" (1 Cor 2:14), or "the carnal mind" (Rom 8:7). The most effective approach to reaching people for Christ is to make Him the preeminent subject of preaching and teaching. Jesus taught that the Scriptures testify of Him (John 6:39), and a holy angel told John "the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Rev 19:10). To the degree that men major on other themes, and interests, whether personal, domestic, or national they effectively obscure Jesus. It is not possible to begin with such issues, and bring men to Jesus. It is not that it should not be done, it **cannot** be done. God Himself has established the context within which Jesus is made known. Men cannot invent their own context, and serve God in doing so! When Jesus spoke and worked, He did so within the context God had established – and He refused to be turned to some other emphasis or pivot. He openly declared that He only said what the Father told Him to say (John 8:28,38;), and only did what the Father gave Him to do (John 5:36; 9:4). He even said, "If I do not the works of My Father, believe Me not" (John 10:37). **It goes without saying that only those who see Jesus as the Father has represented Him can truly benefit from Him.** Those who present Jesus in any other way, regardless of their motives, have managed to hide Jesus from the people, which means they will not be able to receive what he has been sent to give. The Jesus such people present is really "another Jesus" (2 Cor 11:4) – one through whom the intended blessing of God cannot possibly come.

A MAN NAMED NICODEMUS

John 3:1 "There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. "

A MAN OF THE PHARISEES. Other versions read, "among the Pharisees a man," ^{BBE} "a certain man, a Pharisee," ^{NET} "a member of the sect of the Pharisees," ^{LIVING} "one of the Pharisees," ^{IE} and "a certain man among the Pharisees" ^{AMPLIFIED}

Here was a man who was part of a group of men concerning which Jesus never said any good thing. He referred to them as those whose righteousness must be exceeded if one was to "enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:20). He said they "shut up the

kingdom of God against men" (Matt 23:13), did not themselves enter into that kingdom (Matt 23:13), "devoured widows houses," "for pretense" made long prayers (Matt 23:14), and "compassed land and sea to make one proselyte," then making that person "twofold more a child of hell than" themselves (Matt 23:15). He charged them with being "fools and blind" (Matt 23:17,19), and omitting "the weightier matters of the law" (Matt 23:23). He said they were "blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel" (Matt 23:24). He said they were within "full of extortion and excess" (Matt 23:25). He said they "appeared beautiful" outside, but "within" were "full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness" (Matt 23:27), and were "full of hypocrisy and iniquity" (Matt 23:28). He said they were "the children of them which killed the prophets" (Matt 23:31). He boldly said to them, "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?" (Matt 23:33). Is it possible to find anyone truly inclined to Jesus in such a body of people?

NAMED NICODEMUS. Indeed, here is such a man – Nicodemus! He is a member of that group of men who were scathingly rebuked and condemned by Jesus! We will see that he had not been repulsed by the harsh words of Jesus as were other Pharisees. There was something going on in this man that was not taking place in other Pharisees. Others were exposed to the same Man Nicodemus now pursues, and heard the same words Nicodemus heard. However, Nicodemus saw Someone to be pursued, while others saw one whom they thought should be killed (Matt 26:4; John 5:18; 7:1).

This should assist us not to classify people according to the ones with whom they may be identified. There are people, even within corrupt Babylon, to whom the Lord calls: "Come out of her, My people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues" (Rev 18:4). To me, this confirms the reality and necessity of Divine choice – election. I do not know how you could account for men like Nicodemus, or Saul of Tarsus, or the Philippian jailor, apart from the working of the Lord. There are people who are in such suffocating environments that God will extricate as we deliver the message which is "the power of God unto salvation" (Rom 1:16).

Only John mentions Nicodemus. He does so in this passage (John 3:1-9). He also spoke in defense of Jesus before the chief priests and Pharisees: "Nicodemus saith unto them, (he that came to Jesus by night, being one of them,) Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth?" (John 7:50-51). John also tells how Nicodemus joined with Joseph of Arimathaea in handling the body of Jesus: "And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight (75 pounds, ^{NIV}). Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury" (John 19:39-40).

A RULER OF THE JEWS. Other versions read, "a member of the Jewish ruling council," ^{NIV} "a leader of the Jews," ^{NRSV} "a Jewish leader," ^{CEB} "a Jewish religious leader," ^{NLT} "a prominent leader," ^{MESSAGE} and "a ruler (a leader, and authority) among the Jews." ^{AMPLIFIED}

For the most part, here is how a people cultured by Moses and the Prophets thought. **Those who were expert in the Scriptures were chosen to be leaders.** From the beginning of God's dealing with Israel, such men were so considered. It was seen in the priority given to the high priests, the priests, and the prophets. Kings did not anoint prophets, but prophets anointed kings (1 Sam 15:1; 1 Kgs 1:34; 19:16). Moses, the High Priest, and the Prophets – these were the preeminent men within Israel. As history moved

along, the people vaunted other men to be premier, and wicked men seized the authority. But when this happened, Israel fell away, they were chastised, and wicked nations gained the dominance over them.

The same thing has happened in the church. As long as the apostles and their doctrine were dominant, the church flourished and grew to the glory of God and of Christ. But when other men who neither agreed with nor knew the apostles' doctrine, were elevated, the church began to deteriorate spiritually. Soon, institutionalism was raised an idol, and those who promoted the institution were given the predominant positions. But what an awful price was paid for this shift in emphasis. The professing church lost its power, and only had the shell of a form. In order to survive as an institution, it had to borrow its wisdom from the world, and use its methodologies. The result was that God no longer was identified with these lifeless forms. Satan entered in, for this is his kind of environment – and when he did, sin began to flourish once again.

WE KNOW THOU ART A TEACHER SENT FROM GOD

² *"The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto Him, Rabbi, we know that Thou art a Teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that Thou doest, except God be with him."*

Here is a man who was part of a group that did not receive Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. Yet, he was not willing to allow his thinking to be molded by the group. He desired to pursue more understanding on the matter, and therefore personally went to Jesus. This is a procedure that remains sanctified unto this day.

HE CAME TO JESUS BY NIGHT. Other versions read *"at night,"* ^{NIV} *"one night,"* ^{GWN} and *"After dark one evening."* ^{NLT}

The ministry of Christ is sandwiched between two nights – the first when a man was inquiring concerning His ministry, and the second when Jesus was preparing His disciples for His departure. The first was during the commencement of His earthly ministry, and the latter was at its close.

There have been a lot of speculations about why Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. Some have thought it was out of fear of the Jews, or the objections of other Pharisees. I believe these are all baseless speculations. The conduct of Nicodemus later seems to me to disprove such suppositions, for he spoke in defense of Jesus to the rest of the Pharisees (John 7:46-53). It seems to me that it was not convenient to seek personal consultation with the Lord during the day, as He was busy in His ministry, and Nicodemus himself could have been occupied. Also, we have no example of Jesus having an extended personal dialog with any individual during the day. This incident reveals the fervency of Nicodemus' quest for the truth. That is why the Lord Jesus received Him, and spent this quality time with Him during the period when others were sleeping. He had the spirit of David, who also used the night to gain spiritual advantage (Psa 16:7; 17:3; 42:8; 63:6; 77:6; 119:55).

RABBI. Other versions read, *"Teacher,"* ^{WILLIAMS} *"Master."* ^{GOODSPEED} All other versions read *"Rabbi."* The word *"Rabbi"* is a transliteration of the Greek word "rhabbi." The lexical meaning of the word is, *"MY GREAT ONE, MY HONORABLE SIR,"* ^{THAYER} *"MY GREAT ONE,"* ^{FRIBERG} *"O MY MASTER,"* ^{LIDDELL-SCOTT} and *"MY LORD."* ^{GINGRICH} This word is more than a mere title. It is meant to carry the idea of one to whom the speaker is submitted. Nicodemus was expressing the attitude of a willing student – one who truly desired to learn from Jesus. He was not inquiring as a student would of a teacher, but as a subordinate to his Head.

WE KNOW. *"We know that Thou art a Teacher come from God."* Other versions read, *"You have come from God as a Teacher."*^{NASB} This was a Jewish way of looking at things, cultured under Moses and the Prophets:—i.e. *"a Teacher sent from God."* In a feigned attempt of sincerity, the Pharisees once sent someone to Jesus saying, *"Master, we know that Thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest Thou for any man: for Thou regardest not the person of men"* (Matt 22:16; Mk 12:14). That was the occasion when they sought to trap Jesus by asking, *"Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not?"* (Matt 22:17). But this is apparently not the motive that constrained Nicodemus to come to Jesus by night. He was coming as a true disciple, and therefore Jesus will tell him things He did not tell the other Pharisees, or the multitude. This kind of person remains the only type of individual Jesus will teach.

FOR NO MAN. *" . . . for no man can do **these** miracles that Thou doest."* Other versions read, *"these signs,"*^{NKJV} *"perform the miraculous signs,"*^{NIV} *"would be able to do these signs,"*^{BBE} and *"these signs (these wonderworks, these miracles—and produce the proofs."*^{AMPLIFIED} The word translated *"miracles"* means "A SIGN, MARK, TOKEN; THAT BY WHICH A PERSON OR A THING IS DISTINGUISHED FROM OTHERS AND KNOWN; AN UNUSUAL OCCURRENCE, TRANSCENDING THE COMMON COURSE OF NATURE." Such works are not an end of themselves, but are the validation of the one doing them. God gave Moses some signs that would confirm that he was being sent to the people from God (Ex 4:1-9). There are at least thirty-six of Christ's miracles recorded, and none of them was a duplication of works previously done. These works had got the attention of Nicodemus. He had seen they were unique, and therefore drew the following conclusion.

ACCEPT GOD BE WITH HIM. Other versions read, *"unless God is with him,"*^{NASB} *"if God were not with him,"*^{NIV} *"apart from the presence of God."*^{NRSV} This observation accents the fact that the miracles Jesus did had never been done before – not by Moses or the Prophets, and certainly not by John, who *"did no miracle"* (John 10:41). There were people who followed Jesus *"because they saw His miracles"* (John 6:2). But this is not why Nicodemus came to Jesus. He came because He knew Jesus was a *"TEACHER come from God."* He did not come to see another miracle, or to ask for one to be worked upon him. He had evaluated the work and words of Jesus within the context of God Himself. Suddenly, the region was being exposed to unique and powerful words and works. For some people, who were like the Athenians, it was simply *"some new thing"* (Acts 17:21). But for others, like Nicodemus, the absolute uniqueness of the Lord's words and works were noted. Some proceeded to think on these things, while others closed their minds (Matt 13:54-56; Mk 6:2; John 7:31,46; 9:33; 11:37,47).

EXCEPT A MAN BE BORN AGAIN

³ *"Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

How will Jesus answer the observation of Nicodemus? Will He compliment him for his keen insight? Or will He, having perceived his heart, divulge to him something He has not yet told anyone else?

JESUS ANSWERED. Nicodemus did not ask Jesus a question, but made a statement. Now Jesus will reply to his statement. He will comment on the observation made by this Pharisee. This is something about Jesus that is often overlooked. **He evaluates what people think and say.** Once He asked His disciples, *"What was it that ye disputed among yourselves by the way?"* (Mk 9:33). Another time *"Jesus knowing their*

thoughts said, Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts?" (Matt 9:4). Another time, when confronting the Pharisees, *"Jesus perceived their thoughts, He answering said unto them, What reason ye in your hearts?"* (Luke 5:22). Well did Solomon write, *"Go not forth hastily to strive, lest thou know not what to do in the end thereof, when thy neighbor hath put thee to shame"* (Prov 25:8). David once confessed, *"For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O LORD, thou knowest it altogether"* (Psa 139:4). If we are sensitive to the Lord, we will come to know that He monitors both our thoughts and words. In this case, Jesus will comment on what Nicodemus has said.

VERILY, VERILY. Other versions read, *"Most assuredly,"* ^{NKJV} *"Truly, Truly,"* ^{NASB} *"I tell you the truth,"* ^{NIV} *"Very truly,"* ^{NRSV} *"I assure you,"* ^{CEB} *"I tell you,"* ^{CJB} *"I assure you,"* ^{CSB} *"I can guarantee this truth,"* ^{GWN} *"Amen, amen,"* ^{NAB} *"I tell you the solemn truth,"* ^{NET} and *"In all truth I tell you."* ^{NJB}

The word is translated from the Greek word *"Amen."* It means that the statement that follows is the introduction, body, and conclusion. Nothing can be added to it, and nothing can be taken from it. It is a complete thought that is to be received as it stands. Jesus often spoke using the word *"verily,"* which occurs one hundred and three times in the Gospels. The Greek word *"amen"* occurs one hundred and six times in the Gospels.

EXCEPT A MAN BE BORN AGAIN. Here is a totally new expression: *"born again."* This new birth was prefigured by the Lord in previous times.

- "Thy God will circumcise thine heart" (Deut 30:6)
- "New heart and a new spirit" (Ezek 36:26)
- "Create within me a new heart" (Psa 51:10)
- "Thy people shall be willing in the day of Thy power"(Psa 110:3)
- "And I will turn My hand upon thee, and purely purge away thy dross, and take away all thy tin" (Isa 1:25)
- "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped" (Isa 35:5)
- "And I will give them an heart to know Me, that I am the LORD" (Jer 24:7)
- "And I will give them one heart, and one way, that they may fear Me for ever, for the good of them, and of their children after them" (Jer 32:39)
- "I will also save you from all your uncleannesses" (Ezek 36:29).

This is what the apostles called *"a new creature,"* or *"new creation"* (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15). It means that man's basic, or inner, constitution is changed. In the new creation the individual is made capable of perceiving the things of God, and doing the will of God. He is made a partaker of the Divine nature by means of the Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1:4; Heb 3:14).

Unless this rebirth takes place, the person *"cannot see the kingdom of God."* Other versions read, *"it's not possible to see God's kingdom,"* ^{CEB} *"cannot behold,"* ^{MRD} *"is not able to see,"* ^{YLT} *"cannot even see,"* ^{PHILLIPS} and *"he cannot ever see (know, be acquainted with, and experience)."* ^{AMPLIFIED} The word translated *"see"* means, *"TO PERCEIVE BY ANY OF THE SENSES; TO PERCEIVE, NOTICE, DISCERN, DISCOVER."* ^{THAYER}

That is, no person who is not born again can see, detect, perceive, or discern the true working of God – His kingdom. Man, by observation and deduction, cannot find out what God is doing, and where He is dominant. Man has no natural faculties that can be used to decipher the things of God. All of the observations, deductions, conclusions,

reasoning, and determinations concerning the things God that are processed only in the human intellect, are nothing more than suppositions and theories. They are not to be received as truth, and can bring no true benefit to our understanding.

This implies that Nicodemus was incapable of making a truly proper assessment of Jesus. He saw Him as a Teacher. Actually He was *"the Christ"* (Mk 8:29) *"the Son of God"* (Mk 1:1), *"the Savior of the world"* (1 John 4:14), *"the Word made flesh"* (John 1:14), whose goings forth were from of, old, even from everlasting (Mic 5:2). But Nicodemus did not see that!