

Red Letters | The Sermons of Jesus Christ

Out of the Dark, Into the Light (The Exam)

John 3.1-21

1.23.22

Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; ² this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." ³ Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

⁴ Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. ⁶ "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ "Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

⁹ Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? ¹¹ "Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. ¹² "If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ "No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. ¹⁴ "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; ¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. ¹⁷ "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. ¹⁸ "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. ¹⁹ "This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. ²⁰ "For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ "But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God."

During the time between Christmastide and Easter we normally turn our attention to the Four Gospels. For the last three such seasons, we looked at the way Jesus Christ trained His twelve disciples. Now we turn from the "Training of the Twelve" to the discourses or major teaching sections of Jesus Christ.

This year, we plan to focus on the inaugural speech, The Sermon on the Mount. But today, introducing that sermon is a teaching of Jesus to a certain important man named Nicodemus.

Here we find one of the most famous verses in the Bible: John 3:16 AND a phrase that has entered our cultural life but usually misunderstood, the phrase, "born again". If we can see what Jesus Christ actually meant by this phrase and if we can liberate it from its misuse AND see how

the phrase is used here in this amazing conversation, it could put the whole spiritual life in a new and wonderful LIGHT for you.

This famous dialogue aims to change the locus or the source of spiritual confidence i.e. what's the reason that you feel ok about yourself?... And we may find that we're looking for peace in all the wrong places!

So let's look at:

- 1) The Placement Exam**
- 2) The Remedial Instruction**
- 3) The New Way of Knowing**

The passage begins: "There was a man of the Pharisees." And that links us to the previous passage where after Jesus cleanses the Temple and does "signs", the crowds started talking about making Jesus king (also 6.15) ...but He would NOT entrust Himself to the crowds (quote), "because He did not need any man to testify concerning Him, for He Himself knew what was in a man." And then the words, "there WAS A MAN of the Pharisees."

The writer, John, wants us to see that Jesus Christ can perceive the motives of men and THIS MAN is no exception – Jesus Christ can read what's in the heart of this MAN, the Pharisee, Nicodemus.

He's "a man of the Pharisees" They were the religious conservatives, the fundamentalists, forerunners of the Hassidic Jews, very serious about being good, very knowledgeable of the Hebrew Bible. They were the keepers of the Tradition...the standard bearers who alone knew how to interpret the Scriptures.

We could add that while Jesus Christ didn't need approval from people (didn't need the testimony of men) but the Pharisees DID...I mean they really prized recognition from their peers. They attached a LOT of importance to appearance/conformity and fitting in, being accepted within their community.

AND, this "man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus" ("conqueror") was a "ruler of the Jews" i.e. he was a member of the Great Council, the Sanhedrin, so, a very important man, highly credentialed/respected.

Finally, we're told that Nicodemus came "by night".

It could've been just to avoid the crowds who were ALWAYS around Jesus Christ by day. Maybe?

My guess is that Nicodemus came originally by night NOT just to avoid the crowds but to avoid notice. John makes note of it twice (here and CH 19). Maybe Nicodemus was timid... his name

means conqueror but maybe he had a hard time living up to that big name – maybe he was a timid conqueror.

Maybe the Council assigned Nicodemus the task of going to Jesus; maybe he was told to go at night so none of the people would think the Pharisees were even taking this illegitimate “rabbi” seriously.

And the timid man, living in this environment (of religious peer pressure) and afraid to be seen associating with this uncredentialed, backwoods, spiritual leader and yet also ready to address Him as “Rabbi” – well, Nicodemus had a lot to lose... so he’s skulking around in the night... AND yet also, he’s coming out of the darkness of peer pressure and secrecy and coming INTO the Light that Jesus Christ IS: “those who practice truth come INTO the light” (21).

The initial words of Nicodemus... though the words seem to exude respect...yet Jesus hears something in the veneration/honor that we may not hear. “Rabbi, we see that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” (2) Sounds like a nice compliment!

But Jesus Christ hears something else. He realizes that this Pharisee, this Ruler has come to examine Jesus to see if the Pharisees can get behind His ministry and authorize His teaching. Jesus Christ’s reply almost says, “WE? Where’s the WE... I only see YOU!... Truly! Truly, I say to YOU (that’s the singular – “there’s no WE here just you and I!”) I say to YOU (singular) – timid conqueror – forget about being accepted by your WE... forget the opinions of the crowd... Forget about how your party sees things: I say to YOU (singular), unless one is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.” (See the play on words?)

“In your club...you THINK you see how God rules... you THINK you’re the proctors who sets the bar and test what’s true and false about God and spiritual things... In reality, YOU’RE fixated on public opinion and the testimony of the experts in your approval-seekers’ club – AND YOU, Nicodemus, YOU don’t know how God rules and does His work... YOU can’t even see the Kingdom unless you be born again... born from above.”

And Nicodemus doesn’t really get it... He came to examine Jesus, to administer a placement test, but NOW Jesus is examining HIM! And nervously Nicodemus plays along, “How can a man be BORN when he’s old...he can’t enter a second time into his mother’s womb...CAN HE?”

Then Jesus explains this phrase “born again” and the Rabbi is always closing in on the man who came out of the night... “Truly, Truly unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.”

I take that to mean that being born of a woman is NOT enough... being born out of the waters of birth and born physically (from Jewish parents) does NOT qualify you to enter under God's beautiful reign... YOU NEED A SPIRITUAL BIRTH... a second birth.

See, if you asked Nicodemus, "Sir, does God accept you?... Sir, if God asked you, 'Nicodemus, why should I allow you into My Presence...what qualifies you for heaven?'"

I'm pretty sure Nicodemus would say, "Well...I'm a Jew... I'm a descendant of Abraham... I'm one of the chosen people... MY MOTHER WAS JEWISH!"

"Oh so God accepts you because of how you were born...because of your Abrahamic DNA...?"

"Yeah!... I was born of the chosen people!"

And Jesus Christ is saying, "It's NOT the first birth that gets you accepted by God... IT'S A SECOND BIRTH... Your mother gave you life PHYSICALLY but only God, the Spirit, can give you life SPIRITUALLY."

Alright, one little note on interpreting the Bible and then a few take-aways:

Whenever you try to decipher literature, you look for clues and one clue is "key words" – words and ideas that get repeated or stand out...and there are at least three such words here:

First, the word "born": it's used EIGHT times in vv. 3-8 and obviously it's THE key word. In the Greek language that John used it's the word "gennao" like our word "generate". It's always used in the passive voice and the focus is NEVER on something WE do but instead something that gets done TO US.

To tell someone that they have to generate a new birth for themselves misses the whole point... What did YOU do to get born physically? Nothing!

A second group of words are "amazed" (v 7) and "see", "understand", "know" (vv 2, 3, 10). Jesus tells this teacher of Israel, "DON'T marvel because THIS whole teaching is found in our Scriptures...the teachings YOU claim to know so well... Read the prophets and they'll tell you again and again that an outward circumcision is NOT enough... there is another/inward birth... there's a circumcision of the heart that GOD MUST PERFORM."

"So...teacher of Israel... why act like you've never heard this...why marvel as if this is unknown."

And yet... in another sense... IT IS A MARVEL...it's a mystery like the wind...we CAN'T point to where the wind originates or where it ends...we can only see the results. The wind isn't something WE can generate... AND IN THE SPIRITUAL REALM, we can't generate our spiritual

life... it comes from above ...God has to come down to us and work it IN us...and THAT (says Jesus) is what I've come to do!"

And then a third key-word: "believe." It's used seven times (vv. 12-18); obviously important! Somehow this whole dialogue is meant to move Nicodemus to "believe" (or "have faith" same word).

He came to Jesus firmly convinced that HE the all-wise Pharisee could SEE ("We SEE that You are a teacher sent from God...") and Jesus says, "You THINK you see...but you don't. You THINK that seeing is believing...but I say BELIEVING IS SEEING!"

"If you trust me...THAT is the certain sign that the Spirit has made you alive...and those who trust, who simply believe, they are the ones who see... those who believe start getting their questions answered and they who trust Me come from DARKNESS TO LIGHT...from blindness to sight."

Three conclusions: #1) The locus of our confidence. Nicodemus had been conditioned to have confidence in the esteem of his peers. "If people approve of you then you must be a good person...a valuable...significant person! If you have the right ethnicity, parentage, the right look, you're ok."

He was a Pharisee, an expert, an inspector of all things spiritual. People looked to him and thought, "Man, that guy has it together! Most likely to succeed on the Day of Judgment!" He could work the system.

He had all the symbols of success and right-ness and his community affirmed him in every way. And now he's sitting with God (in Jesus Christ) saying, "We think you might have a place in our organization!"

And Jesus Christ says, "Quit foolin' around ("Truly, Truly...") Quit foolin' around. The system your working is now useless. You need Life from God! No matter how good you think you are or how good people SAY you are, unless Life comes down from Heaven and makes you alive – you cannot see...cannot know God.

"This applies to Jews and Gentiles and the whole world..." Nicodemus would have no problem with our favorite verse if Jesus had only gotten it right: it was supposed to say, "God so loved the Jews that He gave His only begotten Son." The in-group is everything!

It's so easy for religious groups/places of worship (any group actually) to become recognition depots ...and back-slappers and approval seekers. It takes a supernatural act of God's Spirit to convince timid approval seekers like I am... "It doesn't matter what THEY think – it doesn't even

matter what I think... IT ONLY MATTERS THAT I HAVE LIFE FROM GOD... Therefore, put your confidence in Him who came to bring life from heaven to earth...trust in the Only Begotten Son.”

#2) Jesus Christ came into the world to raise the dead. Every person you've ever known (including YOU yourself) is in bad shape... we can count on that.

God told our first parents, “In the day you turn from Me and go out on your own, YOU SHALL SURELY DIE.”

Death can't be counteracted by effort (dead people cant exert effort). It's not better education... not better habits or better abs (all those things might be nice) but what we really need is LIFE from God... to be made spiritually alive and responsive to God.

Jesus Christ is like the serpent lifted up in the wilderness with Moses (Num 21) – He came down from heaven (v13) in order to be lifted up on a Cross, to bear our bad record, to become the symbol of my sin, to be lifted up so we would look to Him.

Last, a word to those watching online or sitting in the sanctuary, a word to ANYone who may be sort of thinking about Jesus... and maybe sort of checking out His new society, the Church: have you ever considered that you're here or online today because God is checking YOU out? Examiner examined!

And if God IS examining you, what does He see?

Well, He sees a unique creation – a one-of-a-kind, a person made in God's image and made to actually know Him – to glorify and enjoy Him forever.

And He sees that you are fallen. You have smudges on your record...more smudges than you know and worse than you've imagined. And no matter how well you'd do in the sight of people (you may have all the symbols of success...and great abs!... OR maybe you're just tired...and lonely) but there's NOTHING you can do to expunge your record before God, to erase what you've done, said and thought... AND what you've left undone. It's more than just a little regret; it's an outstanding debt. And if it's not paid for and forgiven – YOU MUST PERISH.

But “God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world THROUGH HIM might be saved”. (John 3.17!)

So look to Him...to look...to trust Him...to put your confidence in His record and His sacrifice is to have eternal life... Trust turns out to be the key to knowing and to really living.

That life can begin RIGHT NOW.