

Gospel of John #5

John 3: Nick at Night

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Many of you know that I really love sports, whether playing soccer, flag football, or ping pong...and watching sports like soccer and cycling. I don't really get to watch NFL football because the games are on Sundays...I like all the Detroit teams, including the Lions who are playing in the play-offs for the first time in 30 years tonight. There are many types of **fans**...

- the ones who don't care
- the fans who are scared to hope ("they'll probably lose tonight")
- the fans who believe that each year is their year (I like this fan!)
- The fan who tries to control their hope for their team: they try to figure it out through statistics and analysis. These people wear their lucky shirts in order to control their hope.

We also try to control hope, a superstitious yet practical behavior.

Nichodemus was also like this: he tried to control his hope for something that he has waited for over 400 years...he tried to live his life in a particular way to realize his hope.

If you know John well, read it chapter by chapter backwards. Let's do that today to learn about Nicodemus; John mentions him three times so we'll start with the final one first:

- John 19: After Jesus died, Joseph of Arimathea asks Pilot for Jesus's body. Nicodemus goes with him and provides 75 pounds of myrrh and spices to put on the body. He cares for Jesus, the condemned criminal.
- John 7: The rule Jewish counsel is in an uproar over Jesus. Nichodemus asks to hear the testimony of Jesus before ruling; he is defending Jesus publicly in front of his peers.
- John 3: Nicodemus seeks Jesus at night to have a conversation with him:

John 3

1 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council.

Pharisees have a bad rap; we condemn them for being overly concerned about external appearances and plots to kill Jesus (which are both true). But they are also very concerned with the Messiah: their sect was motivated to live life and follow the Law so that God would see them as holy and send them the Messiah. Many aspects of the Law were about how to act day to day.

Some of these people were concerned about bringing the Messiah in order to restore their relationship with God. Nicodemus is one of those and comes to Jesus at night:

2 He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

He comes at night: was he afraid? If you wanted to talk with someone who is a teacher surrounded by crowds, maybe nighttime was the best time for a quiet conversation. In fact, I think they had this conversation MANY times: this passage is a summary of these conversations. It wasn't just the healings and the signs, it was the cleansing of the temple. Jesus said he was the one who could purify the temple for a relationship with God. He was saying He was the Messiah, the only one with the right to do this. Nicodemus was very concerned with finding out who the Messiah was: maybe it was Jesus! He wanted to know...

Let's look at this conversation:

3 Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

4 “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!”

5 Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. **6** Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. **7** You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ **8** The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

Jesus hears his question about the Messiah but he doesn't answer it directly. Instead, he tells him how to enter the Kingdom of God which is the work of the Messiah. How can a person be born again? Nicodemus thinks the Messiah is about this life but really, finding the Messiah is about moving from this life to another life: *to be moved and guided by the Spirit.*

9 “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

10 “You are Israel's teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? **11** Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. **12** I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? **13** No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. **14** Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, **15** that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

In our earthly understanding, we are limited in our thinking about heaven. Jesus says you have to think in heavenly terms. When the people of Israel were wandering in the desert, they were dying of snake bites. Moses tells them to look at the bronze snake to be healed. Now John mentions this again, except this time it refers to Jesus, the Son of Man. **We understand life as we look to Jesus lifted up on the cross.**

John 3:16-21

16 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. **17** For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. **18** Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. **19** This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. **20** Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. **21** But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

Believing in the son, we walk into the light, out of darkness.

All week, I kept coming back to the following story from *Voyage of the Dawntreader* by C.S. Lewis. Here the Narnia characters are on a ship, the *Dawntreader*, and they come to a dark island and are terrified. They are in the middle of the darkness and everyone panics because they can't figure out how to get out. In the middle of their fear and panic, Lucy is on the top of the mast and she puts her head down and prays to Asplan (Jesus) "If ever you loved us, will you help us now?" She feels a little lighter and she begins to see a dim cross, which is an albatross, which eventually lands on the ship and guides them out of the darkness into the light. They realize there was nothing to fear. The albatross says to Lucy, "***Courage, dear heart.***"

We consider our stuff that we don't want exposed and it makes us afraid of the light. The darkness terrifies us. God reaches down to the world and says "I love you and want to guide you out of the darkness." He offers us courage: this is the work that Jesus does on the cross.

In the book of John, an interesting thing happens. There is John the disciple and John the WATCHER. His quotes are often unclear as to which one is speaking, where one ends and another begins. In John 3, the end of the conversation about darkness and fear and light isn't clear...it continues on.

22 After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized. **23** Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were coming and being baptized. **24** (This was before John

was put in prison.) **25** An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. **26** They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him."

27 To this John replied, "A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. **28** You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.' **29** The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. **30** He must become greater; I must become less."

This picture of John the Baptist's humility walks us from controlling our hope and figuring out the right way of doing things to looking for the Messiah...he doesn't try to cling to his own power, he lets go of it. Then, the writer John rejoins the conversation:

31 The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. **32** He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. **33** Whoever has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. **34** For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. **35** The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. **36** Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.

Eternal life means when I die, things will be OK in heaven...??? But it's *so much more than that*: the idea is that it's life in abundance tethered to the spirit. When I die, I'm tethered to the spirit and I walk into the new creation where there are no more tears (Rev 21) but **this begins NOW!** It's not for later, it's life in abundance NOW as I look to the son. I am animated and no longer living in darkness and death.

(again) 36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.

Whoever believes in the Son has been animated by the Spirit! Believe here means trust, have allegiance, have faith...to trust that what the Son says is true. This is the invitation to Nichodemus. To reject this is to disobey: To submit to Jesus is to walk into life. Key questions to ask: .

- If I did this, how would things be different?
- What would I do more of if I was moved, directed and guided by the Spirit.
- What would I do less of?

To deny, to disobey, is to remain in darkness and fear. God longs for us to walk out of darkness and fear and into life and relationship with the Son. Do you hear, “Courage, dear heart?” He made a path from the darkness into light, from here into love. We walk out of trying to control and figure it out into hoping in Jesus for what he has done on the cross. This is the invitation to Nicodemus and to us.