

Opening Words

Society may look upon you and frown. Society may not even look upon you. People may ignore you and say that you are not important. But you are important to God!

OSL 021 Nicodemus at Night 1

It was Passover in Israel – the greatest of all the festivals for the people of God – for in this celebration was a reminder of the great acts of God that delivered His people from the bondage of Egypt. In this celebration was something else – a hope and a promise for another deliverance when the Messiah would come.

Three times a year, Jewish men were commanded to attend a feast in Jerusalem – Passover, Pentecost, and Sukkoth (Tabernacles). These pilgrimages kept the heads of the households focused on the one true God as they worshiped at his temple. They were exhilarating experiences, leaving behind everyday experiences, entering a world of festivity and worship, fellowshiping with those of like mind, and identifying with the unique cause of the nation.

Jesus had celebrated the Passover in Jerusalem since he was 12. That Passover has become famous for the things he said to the leaders of Israel even though a youth. This one would be eventful as well for the things he would say to one leader of Israel.

The Passover festivities were glorious. It was the first time for Jesus to celebrate with his disciples. They kept looking to Jesus, wondering if he would do or say anything that might openly show he was the promised Messiah. After he turned the water into wine, their hearts must have been full of expectation, and they were not disappointed. John 2:23 tells us that he performed many signs and that many believed in him.

But the next verse tells us something surprising. It tells us that Jesus did not entrust himself to them! The same Greek word is used. It says in 2:23 that many believed in him, but in 2:24-25 it tells us that Jesus did not believe in them! Jesus did not believe in them because He knew what was in their hearts. They were saying the right things, but in their minds and hearts, they did not understand his mission and have the same motive as his.

What does this tell us about Jesus? It tells us that he was more than a teacher and more than a miracle worker. It tells us that he was God in the flesh for only God can have such thorough knowledge of the innermost thoughts of people. It calls to mind the passage in Mark 2:8 where Jesus offered forgiveness to a paralytic. The Pharisees grumbled about Jesus offering forgiveness, and he knew it. The passage in Mark tells us that he was aware in his spirit about their conversation against him. Only God knows all things. Psalm 139:1-4 says,

You have searched me, LORD,
and you know me.
²You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.

- ³You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
⁴Before a word is on my tongue
you, LORD, know it completely.

Here in John 2 we have Jesus knowing what was in the hearts of people. They were saying one thing and hiding the condition of their hearts. But they could not hide their hearts from Christ. What does this tell us about him? It tells us that he was God in the flesh.

What does this tell us about ourselves? It tells us that we have a great capacity for deception. We deceive others and try to deceive God. But while we can deceive others for a while, we can never deceive God. Jeremiah 17:9-10 says,

The heart is deceitful above all things
and beyond cure.
Who can understand it?
¹⁰“I the LORD search the heart
and examine the mind,
to reward each person according to their conduct,
according to what their deeds deserve.”

And the people were not able to deceive Jesus. He knew what was in their hearts, and he did not entrust himself to them. Such was the case with the people in Jerusalem. They saw Jesus do miracles and they said, “We believe! We believe!” But what did they believe? That Jesus was a miracle worker? That Jesus was a healer? And why did they believe? Was it only that they might see exciting things? Was it only that they might have their afflictions eased? Jesus was concerned for their afflictions and had compassion upon them, but their physical troubles were not their primary need.

And so Jesus left them and went his way, refusing to spend more time with these insincere believers, because he knew what was in their heart.

But one man followed. He was one of the rulers of the people. He was a teacher in Israel, some said, the teacher in Israel. His name was Nicodemus and he was intrigued by what this Jesus had said and done. He knew what he had to do. He knew he must speak to this man who had performed the miracles and who, at the same time, had refused the acclamations of the people. And he would do it soon. He would do it that night.

Chapter 3:1 tells us that Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jewish people. This probably identifies him as a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest ruling body in the land, but it also identifies him as one of the elite members of the city. He is a man of influence. He is a man of power, and he is a man who admires Jesus and wants to learn more.

The Gospel of John also identifies him as a Pharisee. The Pharisees were a strict sect of Jewish men who believed they had the correct interpretation of the laws of Moses. They relied not only on the words of Moses but on the traditions of the elders of Israel. They believed everyone should follow their vision of how the people of God should live and if everyone would follow their example, then the Messiah would come, so they thought. But not everyone followed the Pharisees, and even if they wanted, not everyone could. Their applications of the Laws of Moses were too strict. The common people could not even begin to follow all that they said was necessary to obey God.

Yet, Nicodemus sees something in Jesus that is different and admirable, and when he comes to him at night he says, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God because no one can do the miracles you do if God were not with him.”

We must note two things about Nicodemus’ words. First, he calls Jesus, “Rabbi,” which means “my teacher,” or “my master.” This was a mark of the highest respect. Nicodemus was a wealthy, highly educated city-dweller. Jesus was a poor, itinerant preacher from the hills of Galilee who had little formal education. For Nicodemus, this was a sign of great humility. Nicodemus also acknowledges that God is with Jesus. This is something that many, that most of the ruling class would never say about Jesus. They would never acknowledge even partial faith in Jesus as Nicodemus is here doing.

But it is not enough. We can commend Nicodemus for coming. We can commend him for his humility in calling Jesus, rabbi. We can commend him for acknowledging that Jesus does his mighty works by the power of God, but it is not enough.

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

Born again? What in the world would that mean? And why would Jesus bring up such a subject as one’s birth?

In the ancient world in which Jesus and Nicodemus lived, one’s status was largely based upon the family into which one was born. Whatever status you were born into, that is the status you retained for the duration of your life. If you were born into an elite family, you would be an elite person all your life. If you were born of humble stock, you would be a person of low standing for the rest of your life. Nicodemus must have been born into an elite family to be considered a ruler of the Jewish people. It was a privilege he made the most of in his life and a badge he must have worn proudly. Yet, Jesus was talking to him about being born again! Wasn’t his first birth good enough? And what if in his second birth he was born into a lower rank? Besides, how could he be born again, and so Nicodemus asks, “How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

Nicodemus has missed the point, by a mile! He shows that he was so locked into the ancient world of honor and shame being derived from one’s family that any talk of being born only means physical birth. He has not considered the spiritual implications of what Jesus is saying. And this is surprising. In the Greek, the word for “again” can also be translated “from above.” If Nicodemus had taken time to reflect, he might have caught that Jesus wasn’t talking about being born again physically, but

being born from heaven, being born from God, being born from above. And what could be a higher honor than being born of God! That is the source of true honor.

It's also possible that Nicodemus knew of Roman practices of adoption where non-family members were adopted into an elite family, given the family name, and given an honorable status. And later rabbinic thinking said that when a gentile repented, turned to the God of Israel he was considered a newborn child. Surely, this thinking was also present in the first century. Nicodemus should have known these things. But he did not. Nicodemus missed the point when he spoke about the impossibility of entering his mother's womb.

What about you? What do you understand about this? I would like to take a moment and ask you this question. Have you been born from above? What is it that you are trusting in? Do you have an honorable status in life and because of this status you think that you are OK with God? I have news for you. Your status in this life has no bearing on your relationship with God. The things that are honorable in the world are often dishonorable to God. People gain honor in this world because of the way they look, or the position they hold at work, or the amount of money they earn. This means nothing to God. The only honor that is worth anything is the honor that comes from what God thinks about us. What does he think about you? Have you been born from above? I want to encourage you to humble yourself before him so that you can become his child, so that you can be in his family.

And let me say a quick word to you who are not of a noble standing in this world. God has good news for you! He wants you to be in his family. Society may look upon you and frown. Society may not even look upon you. People may ignore you or say that you are of no consequence, that you are not important. But you are important to God! He wants you to come into his family. He wants you to have a spiritual birth, to be born again, to be born from above, and to be his child.

Whatever your condition, rich or poor, honored or common, known or unknown, Jesus has one word for you – you must be born again. You can be born again right now. Would you like to be? Pray this with me. "Lord Jesus, I need you. I realize that without you I am nothing. Whatever I have in my life, or whatever I have missed in my life means nothing. All that matters is what you have for me. I receive you as my Savior and ask you to receive me as your child." Amen.