



Metro Calvary – Roseville CA  
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# The Gospel of John

## The Man Who Came By Night

[John 3:1-2](#)

**Related Topics:** Nicodemus; Rich Man; Powerful Man; Pharisee; Mishnah; Talmud; Scribes; Sanhedrin; Ruler of the Jews; Hunger for the Lord; Humility; Secret Believer; Fear of Man; Little Faith; Genuine Faith; Jesus Knowing Hearts; Jesus Meeting Us In Our Weakness; Grace

### INTRODUCTION

#### *A Continuation of Events*

When the Bible was written in its original languages there were no designation of chapters and verses. The chapter divisions were not divinely inspired, they were inserted in the early **1200s**. This was done for much the same reason your house and my house has numbers in front of them. These chapters are like addresses by which we can find the location of particular sections / events / persons or truths. In the **1500s** those 1,889 chapters were further divided into 31,173 verses.

Though they were inserted by the translators for the convenience of study, chapter breaks can sometimes obscure context. To best understand the flow of events in the life of Christ let's put 2:23 - 3:1 together without the break.

**John 2:23-3:1** <sup>23</sup>Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. <sup>24</sup>But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people <sup>25</sup>and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man. **John 3** <sup>1</sup>Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

As we read these verses as a continuation of events we immediately see that this man is set apart from the crowd. When the people saw the miracles of Jesus in Jerusalem *many* professed to believe in Jesus. But Jesus, knowing what was in the hearts of all men, didn't believe in their belief, and would not commit to them. But Jesus, knowing what was in the hearts of all men, saw something different in Nicodemus. It would do us well to get to know this man who was sincerely seeking after God.

## Who Was Nicodemus

**<sup>1</sup>Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."**

What we know of Nicodemus is only found in John's gospel. He's mentioned three times. Here in **Chapter 3**, the famous "Nic at Night" chapter, he **Desires** Jesus. In **Chapter 7**, he **Defends** Jesus. In **Chapter 19**, we see his **Devotion** to Jesus. He steps out of the shadows with Joseph of Arimathea to ask Pilate for permission to take Jesus down from the cross and prepare Him for burial.

### 1.) A Rich Man

When Jesus died, Nicodemus brought "*a mixture of myrrh and aloes about an hundred pound weight*" for the burial of Jesus (**Jn 19:39**). In our system of weights and measurements that's about 65 to 70 pounds of aloes and myrrh. There's an expense there that's hard for us to imagine. This was a burial fit for a king that would be purchased at a kingly price. Nicodemus was a man of means.

Along side of that, the Talmud tells us about a person in Jerusalem called Nicodemus Ben Gorion. And the Talmud says Nicodemus Ben Gorion is the brother of Josephus, the historian. The Talmud says that he is the third richest man in Jerusalem. When his daughter got married the wedding was so opulent that all of Jerusalem was awed by it. Tradition holds that he lost all of his wealth by attaching himself to the Christians. Before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. it said his daughter was seen scraping barley off of the floor of a stable in Jerusalem.

Tradition also holds that Nicodemus Ben Gorion was taken in by the religious scholar Gamaliel. Perhaps it was the influence of Nicodemus that moved Gamaliel to say to the Sanhedrin in **Acts 5:38-39** - *So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; <sup>39</sup>but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!*"

So I think this is very likely the same Nicodemus of **John 3**.

### 2.) A Religious Man

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. The Pharisees were the most fanatically religious people in the nation of Israel. And in many ways they were the most respected group of men in

Israel. There were never more than 6,000 of them. They were known as a brotherhood". They entered into this brotherhood by taking a pledge in front of three witnesses that they would spend all their lives observing every detail of the scribal law.

### The Apostle Paul describes this commitment

*Phil 3:4-6* <sup>4</sup>though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup>circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless.

The name Pharisee means the Separated One. The Pharisees were those who had separated themselves from all ordinary life in order to keep every detail of the law of the scribes.

What exactly did that mean? The mindset of the Pharisees was like this: *"The Law is complete; it contains everything necessary for the living of a good life. Therefore, in the Law there must be a regulation to govern every possible incident in every possible moment for every possible man."* So they set out to extract from the Law an infinite number of rules and regulations to govern every conceivable situation in life.

This was best illustrated in regards to the Sabbath law. In the Old Testament ([Exodus 20:8-10](#)) the nation of Israel was simply told that they must *remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy* and that on that day *no work must be done*, either by a man or by his servants or his animals. Not content with that, the later Jews spent hour after hour and generation after generation defining what work is and listing the things that may and may not be done on the Sabbath day.

A religious group within Israel known as the **Scribes** spent their lives working out these rules and regulations. They recorded these rules and regulations in what is called the **Mishnah**, a collection of writings containing the oral tradition of Jewish law. In the **Mishnah** the section on the Sabbath is some twenty-four chapters long. **The Talmud** is the explanatory commentary on the Mishnah. In the Babylonian Talmud there are one hundred and fifty-six double pages of commentary and explanation of just the Sabbath rules and regulations.

**EXAMPLE:** The kind of thing they did was this. To tie a knot on the Sabbath was to work; but a knot had to be defined. *"The following are the knots the making of which renders a man guilty; the knot of camel drivers and that of sailors; and as one is guilty by reason of tying them, so also of untying them."* On the other hand knots which could be tied or untied with one hand were quite legal. However, *"a woman may tie up a slit in her shift and the strings of her cap and those of her girdle, the straps of shoes or sandals, of skins of wine and oil."*

Here's what happened. Suppose a man wished to let down a bucket into a well to draw water on the Sabbath day. He could not tie a rope to it, for a knot on a rope was illegal on the Sabbath. But he could tie it to a woman's girdle and let it down, for a knot in a girdle was quite legal. **That** was the kind of thing which became a matter of life and death to the **Scribe** and the **Pharisee**.

For men like Nicodemus, **that** was religion. For men like Nicodemus, **that** was pleasing and serving God.

**EXAMPLE:** Take the case of journeying on the Sabbath.

*Exo 16:29 "Remain every man of you in his place; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day."*

A Sabbath day's journey was therefore limited to two thousand cubits which is roughly equal to one thousand yards. But, if a rope was tied across the end of a street, the whole street became one house and a man could go a thousand yards beyond the end of the street. Or, if a man left enough food for one meal on Friday evening at any given place, that place technically became his house and he could go a thousand yards beyond it on the Sabbath day.

**EXAMPLE:** Take the case of carrying a burden.

*Jer 17:21-24 said: "Take heed for the sake of your lives and do not bear a burden on the Sabbath day."*

So a burden had to be defined. It was defined as "food equal in weight to a dried fig, enough wine for mixing in a goblet, milk enough for one swallow, honey enough to put upon a wound, oil enough to anoint a small member, water enough to moisten an eye-salve," and so on and so on and so on.

It had then to be settled whether or not on the Sabbath a woman could wear a brooch, a man could wear a wooden leg or dentures; or would it be carrying a burden to do so? Could a chair or even a child be lifted? And so on and on the discussions and the regulations went.

**The *rules* and regulations and the *evasions* piled up by the hundreds and the thousands.**

It was the ***Scribes*** who worked out these regulations; it was the ***Pharisees*** who dedicated their lives to keeping them.

Obviously, however misguided a man might be, he had to be fanatically committed if he set out to undertake obedience to every one of the thousands of rules. That is precisely what the Pharisees did.

With all of this in mind, you can begin to understand how Jesus no doubt blew the minds of those listening to the Sermon on the Mount when He said in ***Matt. 5:20 Unless your righteousness exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.***

**Nicodemus was a Pharisee**, a man who had given himself to that kind of life in the conviction that he was pleasing God. **It is amazing** that such a religious man would come to Jesus.

### **3.) A Ruler**

We read in **Verse 9-10** *Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"* <sup>10</sup>*Jesus answered him, "Are you **the** teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"*

History tells us it was en vogue to study in Jerusalem with Gamaliel and Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews. He was a member of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a court of 70 members and was the supreme court of the Jews. These were the most powerful men in Israel. These 70 men had religious jurisdiction over every Jew in the world; and one of its duties was to examine and deal with anyone suspected of being a false prophet. **Again, it is amazing** that Nicodemus should come to Jesus at all.

## **His Strengths and Weaknesses**

**<sup>1</sup>Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>This man came to Jesus by night.....**

Nicodemus occupies a central place in one of the most important chapters of the Bible.

<sup>3</sup>*Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

<sup>6</sup>*That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*

<sup>14</sup>*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,*

<sup>16</sup>*"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

It is not by coincidence that we find this man as the one who would hear from Jesus the most foundational and profound truths of the Christian faith.

We found Nicodemus here because the Holy Spirit is setting him before us as a wonderful example of how graciously the Lord deals with those who would follow Him.

### ***The Strengths of Nicodemus***

**FIRST - We note** that HE CAME to Jesus.

**John 3:3** *Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

> Jesus ANSWERS Nicodemus before he even asks the question. **That answer** tells us the great concern of this man's heart.

*“How righteous does a man have to be to enter the Kingdom of God?”  
“How can you enter the Messiah’s Kingdom?”*

For all of his wealth, his religion and power, Nicodemus was concerned for his soul! Most people that have wealth are concerned about keeping it or having more of it. The concerns of the soul are far from their minds and hearts. Most religious people have no concern for their souls because they are falsely secure in their religion. Most people of power are not concerned with their souls because they are deluded into thinking that they are powerful enough to over rule God.

> While most of the Sanhedrin debated and hated Jesus for His miracles, Nicodemus knew that they were supernatural.

*VERSE 2 — “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”*

**SECOND** - While most of the Sanhedrin debated and hated Jesus for His miracles, Nicodemus knew that they were divine in their origin.

*VERSE 2 — “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”*

**THIRD** – He came to Jesus in great humility.

Despite the prevailing view of Jesus Nicodemus came to Jesus as a learner, not a ruler, or a teacher. Nicodemus came to Jesus and called Him “Rabbi”, which means “Great One.” Despite all that he had going, there was tremendous humility in Nicodemus.

**FOURTH** - he came with a tremendous sense of need.

Despite all of his wealth, despite all of his amazing dedication and zeal for religion, despite all of his knowledge of the Old Testament, despite all of his power, Nicodemus was empty. He discovered that none of those things gave life! He discovered that none of those things satisfied his great need for God. A need he believed would be met in and by Jesus

**How about YOU?** Do you care about your soul? Will you come to Jesus in the face of prevailing opinion? Will you come willing to be instructed? Will you come as one in need?

**The Holy Spirit points out** all of these great strengths in Nicodemus, so that we might see what things are essential to coming to Christ.

But as we have said on so many occasions, the Holy Spirit never airbrushes over the very real human weaknesses of the great men or women in Scripture. He paints them

warts and all, in order to make obvious the unmerited favor of God towards those sincerely seeking Jesus, and show us the patience of Jesus with human failure and frailty.

As we consider these things we want to remember that the response of Jesus to Nicodemus is much different from His response to the multitudes in Jerusalem.

*John 2:23-24 .....many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. <sup>24</sup>But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people <sup>25</sup>and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.*

### **The Weakness of Nicodemus**

#### **<sup>2</sup>This man came to Jesus by night**

While in some ways Nicodemus was very strong in his first steps towards Jesus, he was in other ways very weak. For all of the concern for his soul, he ***came to Jesus by night***. Though he was convinced that Jesus was of God and that the rest of the Sanhedrin was wrong, he did not have the faith or the courage to go to Jesus in broad daylight.

Later in the life of Christ, we find another reference to Nicodemus.

*John 7:43-51 <sup>43</sup>So there was a division among the people over him. <sup>44</sup>Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him. <sup>45</sup>The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, "Why did you not bring him?" <sup>46</sup>The officers answered, "No one ever spoke like this man!" <sup>47</sup>The Pharisees answered them, "Have you also been deceived? <sup>48</sup>Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? <sup>49</sup>But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed." <sup>50</sup>Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, <sup>51</sup>"Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?"*

While the Pharisees were considering ways to silence Jesus; negate His influence, and perhaps even get rid of Him altogether, Nicodemus speaks up. But it's in a noncommittal way. There is no direct defense of Jesus. No personal defense of the One Nicodemus believes to be the Messiah.

In fact, John makes this statement in his gospel.

*John 12:42-43 Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; <sup>43</sup>for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.*

Nicodemus was at best a secret believer and at worst concerned for the praises of man.

### **JESUS: Full of Grace**

In the life of Nicodemus we see strengths that we admire. We see weaknesses that we can identify with. But we also learn about the amazing grace of God towards us. We learn how a man can, by the grace of God, grow in faith and boldness and love for Jesus.

This secret believer, who in **John 3** can only muster enough courage to visit Jesus at night, and in **John 7** can only muster enough boldness to make a general defense of Jesus, will step forward with incredible boldness at the worst possible time to be associated with Jesus.

***John 19:39-40** Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. <sup>40</sup>So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.*

After the crucifixion the disciples of Jesus went into hiding. But Nicodemus, along with a man of Arimathea named Joseph, steps forward to be identified with the man who had just been brutally and shamefully murdered at the hands of the Roman procurator and by consent and desire of his fellow religious rulers.

Though he began poorly he finished well. His faith at the end was greater than at the beginning. The man who started off with confusion at night ended up with open confession in the daylight! Nicodemus came out of the dark and into the light and, with Joseph, was not ashamed to publicly identify with Jesus Christ. In fact, when we get to John 19 we will see the most amazing display of love and adoration of Jesus come from this man who 2+ years earlier could barely make his way to come to Jesus by night!

Remember, the same Jesus who saw through the fake faith of the crowds in **JOHN 2** also saw into the heart of this one man. He knew every one of the weaknesses of Nicodemus. Before Nicodemus ever showed up Jesus was fully aware that Nicodemus could only muster enough faith for a secret meeting in the dark of night. **But Jesus knew that his little faith was real faith.**

**THIS IS A JESUS MOMENT** - We need to remember how Jesus received this man.

***Isaiah 42:3** a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;*

***Mat 12:20 NLT** He will not crush those who are weak, or quench the smallest hope, until he brings full justice with his final victory.*

The way that Jesus dealt with this man who came by night teaches us that we should never judge a man by his first faltering steps towards Christ. Those first steps that might be timid and wavering and hesitating can be moved by genuine faith, the kind of faith that Jesus believes in and commits to.

We are so often so quick to do the opposite. If a person is not on the same page as we are concerning faith or they do not possess boldness to stand openly for Jesus, we want to condemn them.

Jesus not only received Nicodemus, He chose to speak to him about the greatest need of man, the New Birth! That is the way our gracious and merciful Savior dealt with the Man Who Came By Night.

## PERSONAL APPLICATIONS

If you identify with Nicodemus in his weakness today, be encouraged by the heart of Jesus for such a person. He knows what is in your heart and if there is real faith there. He wants to strengthen it until you too will stand up for Jesus at the most difficult of times.

If you have strong faith in Christ, remember to deal with those taking their first steps towards Jesus in the same way Jesus dealt with Nicodemus.

The Holy Spirit, by way of Nicodemus, teaches us that in matters of faith we should never *"despise the day of small things"* ([Zec. 4:10](#)) We should never conclude that there is no genuine faith or work of God because someone's first steps towards God are timid or wavering. Remember the way Jesus received Nicodemus.

It is not those who make a flaming profession of faith in the beginning who endure the longest. Judas was an apostle while Nicodemus was still groping his way slowly into greater faith. But while Nicodemus was boldly helping to bury Jesus, Judas had hanged himself for betraying Jesus.

## CLOSING

The year was **1505**. A young man named **Martin** returning home found himself caught in a **violent storm**. Terrified, he made a "deal" with God, *"God, if you let me live I'll become a **monk!**"* Martin Luther made it through the storm and fulfilled his vow. He entered the Augustinian order of monks in Erfurt, Germany. He openly admitted that he entered the monastery out of **constraint**, not **commitment**.

Later, while in Wittenberg, he obsessively performed his religious tasks. All of his religious zeal and efforts never seemed enough. He wrestled with his own salvation. He hungered for acceptance by God. He realized his emptiness.

While on a trip to Rome, which he thought would earn him some form of spiritual merit, he climbed the steps of Pilate's house on his knees. This is where many church historians believe Luther first gained a true understanding of the gospel. A verse came to mind that changed his life. [Rom. 1:17](#) *"the righteous man shall live by faith."* Like a flash of lightning, it struck him, *"It is faith that justifies...not works!"* He said, *"I felt myself to have been born again, and to have entered through open gates into paradise itself."*

Luther had been pounding on heaven's door, trying to open it by the strength of his own remarkable religious efforts. **Exhausted**, he fell on his knees before that door and realized a liberating truth: Jesus is the door, and the door opens to no human effort. *Rather, the door swings on the well-oiled hinges of **Christ's righteousness** and opens by **faith**.*

**NEXT WEEK** — As we continue in **John 3** — we are going to eaves drop on the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Jesus begins the conversation by saying — ***I TELL YOU THE TRUTH NICODEMUS.***

**You don't want to miss this conversation.**

**QUOTE: J.C. Ryle** — *A man may be ignorant of many things in the Bible, and yet be saved. But to be ignorant of the matters handled in this chapter, is to be in the broad way which leads to destruction.*