

“Nic at Night”

Have you ever stopped to consider the things God cannot do? Let me name a few. One thing He can't do is lie. Number 23:19 insists: "God is not man, that He should lie, or a son of man, that He should change His mind. Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not fulfill it?" God cannot lie, for that would be a violation of His holy character.

That's why many of the questions posed by skeptics are silly. Have you come across this one? They ask, "If your God is all-powerful and able to do anything, can He create a rock too big for Him to lift?" That's silly talk, isn't it, because what they're trying to do is pit God's creative power against His power to do miracles, asking Him to violate His own Almighty nature, something He said He will not do. God cannot lie, nor will He ever contradict His own holy, immutable character.

One more question while I'm at it! Are there are sins God can't forgive? Only one! Am I right? That's rejecting Jesus as your Lord and Savior, for other than that one unpardonable sin, Jesus died for every sin and blasphemy we commit. That means if you have Jesus, your every sin has been forgiven—past, present, and future! But if you do not “believe that I AM,” Jesus warned, “you will die in your sins.” Because He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world – our Only Hope of Salvation! But except for these things, nothing shall be impossible for God!

Now let's talk about ourselves. Is there anything we can't do if we put our minds to it? “Absolutely not!” the New Agers, humanists, and cults tell us. “You can do anything if you'll learn to believe in yourself!” Fools! The list of what we can't do is endless. But the one that tops the list is the one before us in this study—the impossibility of being born again!

Let me remind you where we left off in our last study. We were in Jerusalem where Jesus has performed countless miracles for over a year, proving that He's God, with hundreds of people saying to Him, “I believe in you, Jesus, I believe you're Messiah!” John 2:23 explains, “Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many were believing in (**pisteuo** = **believe**) His name when they saw the signs He was doing.” But verse 24 adds, “Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting (**pisteuo** = **entrust**) Himself to them.” It is a play on words. The people, on the one hand, were believing in Jesus, but Jesus wasn't believing in them!

Why not? John explains, “He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.” And what He knows isn't good! For as the Bible makes clear about us in many places, “In me, that is, in my flesh dwells no good thing!” (Romans 7:18) The only good thing about you, if your faith is genuine, is that Jesus now lives in your heart and has given you a new nature.

That brings us to chapter 3 where we meet a man from Jerusalem who has just seen the miracles of Jesus and concluded, “This is a teacher sent by God!” By the way, do you think that's a coincidence, that John now introduces us to someone who exemplifies what he's just told us at the end of chapter 2? Of course not! John is a fisherman, and if anyone knows how to tell a good story, it's a fisherman. But in this case, it's true and inspired by the Holy Spirit who, Jesus said, is the Spirit of truth. That means that whatever you find in this Book, you can trust. Unfortunately for this man, he isn't a true believer because he doesn't yet have the right kind of belief. That's something John warns us again and again in this book. There is a belief that is not a belief because it's a belief that's superficial, self-serving, and refuses to give Jesus the glory He deserves as God the Son.

Open your Bible, then, to John chapter 3 where we're going to meet “The Original Nic at Night,” and therein discover both what it means and why it's imperative to be “born from above.” This study has 3 parts: 1) the Sinner's Crisis, 2) the Savior's Counsel, 3) the Spirit's Conversion.

1. The Sinner's Crisis

John 3:1 says, “Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 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.’”

By the way, did you know that no one ever doubted Jesus' power to do miracles? His enemies certainly didn't. Instead, what was their explanation for Jesus being able to do miracles, so they wouldn't have to bow to Him as Lord? They said His power to do miracles came from the devil. This made them guilty of blaspheming the Holy Spirit and committing the one sin that can never be forgiven - the sin of rejecting Jesus as Lord. In fact, it's only now, 20 centuries later, that skeptics are so wise in their own eyes that they

reject the testimony of eyewitnesses, saying to themselves, “Those ancient weren’t smart enough to know what I know today!”

So who was Nicodemus? He had a Greek name as many of the Jews did at that time. Nico means conquer and Demus means people. So put it together, and what do you get? Nicodemus, “victor over the people.” Don’t read too much into that. It was just a name. Nor should we read a lot into the fact that he came to Jesus at night. I’m not convinced, as preachers suggest, that “night” is a metaphor for the darkness of his soul. I think he just hadn’t made up his mind about Jesus yet and was being careful because he knew the Pharisees were watching and opposed to Jesus. Instead, what I think what we need to remember about him are these three facts:

1) **He too was a Pharisee.** The word means “a separated one.” These were the ultra-conservative, Bible believers of Israel who interpreted the Bible literally. They believed in angels, devils, miracles, the six days of creation, heaven, hell - all of which made Nicodemus anxious because he knew he wasn’t ready to stand before God in judgment. They were also conservative in lifestyle. You know the ultra-orthodox, Hasidic branch of Judaism today? These were its founders, and they were absolutely rabid about keeping the Law, priding themselves not only in the fact that they kept all 613 commandments of the Old Testament (Remember the rich young ruler? “All these things I have kept from my youth!”); but they had also come up with over a thousand laws or mitzvot of their own, to make sure that they never even came close to crossing the line.

For example, one thing a Pharisees would never do, or let his wife do, was look in a mirror on the Sabbath. Why not? Because she might find a gray hair and be tempted to pluck it, which they considered doing work on the Sabbath! A Pharisee could also eat an egg that was laid on the Sabbath, but only if he killed the hen that laid it as a penalty for working on the Sabbath. That’s how ridiculous it got. And all for nothing! Because as holy as they thought they were and seemed to be on the surface (We’re good at fooling ourselves and others, aren’t we?), Jesus called them whitewashed tombs who looked beautiful on the outside, but on the inside were full of dead men’s bones and every kind of uncleanness.

By the way, based on everything that's said about the Pharisees in the Gospels, you might think they were a large group. Not so! There were only

6,000 of them in all Israel at the time. But then it doesn't take a huge group to change the world for good or bad, does it, just a highly dedicated group? That's what they were! The Pharisees believed if they could somehow get the entire nation of Israel to keep the Law for just one day, God's Kingdom would come to earth. "But now, with this carpenter from Galilee defying our laws and challenging our authority, the Kingdom will never come!"

No wonder that of all Jesus' enemies, they were the most vicious. They hated Him so much that only one Pharisee in the Bible, other than Nicodemus, ever came to follow Him. Who was that? The Apostle Paul who would have never bowed to the Lordship of Jesus if Jesus hadn't struck him blind on the road to Damascus! Later, Paul wrote of his life as a Pharisee, "I was a Hebrew of Hebrews, as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless! But whatever things were gain to me...I now count as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ." (Philippians 3:6)

2) He was a ruler of the Jews, meaning that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish High Council made up of its 70 most powerful leaders, including the high priest, and comprising what was in essence the Congress and Supreme Court of Israel. This means Nicodemus was a very, very powerful and influential man. Church tradition says he was one of the three wealthiest men in Jerusalem at the time.

3) He was, according to verse 10, not just a teacher, but "the teacher of Israel." Jesus uses the definite article to indicate that of all the rabbis in Israel at this time, Nicodemus was the best and brightest. As such, he would have been like a walking Bible dictionary, able to quote the entire Old Testament by memory. That means when talking to him, all Jesus had to do was mention a topic and every verse on that subject would have come to his mind.

4) But above all, he was a lost and desperate soul. After all, what do you do when you've spent your whole life scaling the ladder of self-righteousness and reached the pinnacle of your religion only to learn that it's gotten you nowhere and has all been a waste of time? The only thing left to do that point is to turn to Jesus! So that's what he did. He comes to Jesus lost, fearful, and wondering how to be saved. That's the sinner's crisis. Now look with me at the Savior's counsel for sinners like you and me.

2. The Savior's Counsel

Nicodemus says to Jesus, "Rabbi" meaning "teacher." That was something Nicodemus was called every day of his life, for of all teachers in Israel, he was the most respected. But now his soul is in trouble and he is desperate for help! So he turns to the Teacher who surpasses him in every way saying, "Rabbi, we know that You're a teacher from God, for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."

Nicodemus didn't ask a question, but Jesus has the answer. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Sounds like a non sequitur, doesn't it? In other words, how did what you said have anything to do with what I said? Ever had a conversation like that with somebody—maybe your spouse? But that isn't how Nicodemus takes it. He realizes that what Jesus has just done is read his mind. Jesus knows Nicodemus' guilt and his fears, and He knows yours too!

Nicodemus has heard Jesus preach several times by now. So he's aware how superficial his own righteousness is. That's something every hypocrite knows in his heart. He knows he's a hypocrite. And the Pharisees were hypocrites—every one of them! How can I say that? Because that's what Jesus calls them five times in Matthew 23 alone: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" Then He adds, "You travel over land and sea to make one convert, and when you finally win him, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves!"

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a hypocrite, and a son of hell! And he knew it! So what does Jesus do? He ignores the flattery and goes straight to the heart of his problem. "Truly, truly, I say to you." That means He's about to correct a false teaching Nicodemus was guilty of. What false teaching was that? The false teaching of apostate Judaism that you can earn God's favor by your good works and self-righteousness! Jesus corrects that saying to him not once, but 5 times in 8 verses, "You must be born again!"

Jimmy Carter made that a household term when he ran for president in 1976 and claimed to be a born-again Christian. Since then the term has been misapplied to everything from born-again athletic careers to second-hand books and used cars. So here's a suggestion when talking to someone about their faith. Use the second, not the first meaning of the word. What do I mean? The Greek word ***anōthen*** can either be translated "born again"

or “born from above.” The second meaning is what Jesus had in mind - without receiving new life from above, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.

The analogy of birth is the best way to explain salvation to a self-righteous person like Nicodemus. For just as an unborn baby is helpless to contribute anything to his own birth, in the same way you and I are helpless to contribute anything to our salvation. Religion is useless, no matter what group you belong to or how sincere you are, because everything you do is tainted by your sinful nature. Isaiah 64:6 says, “We are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousness is like a filthy rag.” Consequently, what we need if we wish to enter God’s Kingdom is the new life that Jesus offers.

Remember what John said in John 1:12? “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the power to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”

So don’t waste your time looking for self-help books telling you how to be born again. Sometimes you’ll hear that. Here are four steps to being born again. But that contradicts the very thing Jesus is teaching. His point is there is absolutely nothing you can do to save yourself, except to throw yourself on His mercy and ask Him to give you new life.

Nicodemus gets that better than most Bible-believing Christians. He knows he’s helpless to save himself. But like most of us, he thinks, “If I can understand all of this just a little better, it will be so much easier to believe.” You can see that in verse 9 where he wonders, “How can these things be?”

But that's not how it works. Understanding doesn’t come before believing. On the contrary, there are many things about Jesus you’ll never understand until you believe in Him. So Jesus corrects him again, “Are you **the teacher** of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” (You see in his case, his lack of understanding was due to his lack of belief, not a lack of information! After all, this was the outstanding scholar of Israel who had the entire Old Testament hidden in his heart!) Read on and you’ll see that yourself. Jesus continues, “Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. (Remember receiving is another word for believing!) If I have told you earthly things, and you do not believe, (Unbelief was his problem!) how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”

Nicodemus' problem is he's an unbeliever - his mind blinded by the devil, his will enslaved to sin, and his affections corrupted by the world. So he's going to need help to believe. That's the point of verse 4. "How can a man be born when he's old? He can't enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" Nicodemus isn't dumb. Nor is he challenging Jesus at this point. Then what's he doing? He's asking for a clue, which Jesus graciously gives him. We've seen the sinner's crisis and the Savior's counsel. In the next part of our study, we'll focus on the Spirit's conversion.

3. The Spirit's Conversion

The first clue Jesus gives him is in verse 5: "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'" Spirit, of course, refers to the Holy Spirit.

But what does it mean to "born of water"? Some say it refers to baptism. But how can that be true? Baptism does not save us. Baptism is a testimony that we've already been born from above. Others say it refers to the waters of birth. But that can't be right either. First century Jews weren't yet aware of the role amniotic fluid plays in the birth of a child. Nor did Nicodemus need to be told that he had to be born the first time before he could be born a second time. So what was Jesus referring to?

Remember Nicodemus was an Old Testament scholar whose mind would have immediately tracked with Jesus, taking him to passages like Ezekiel 36 where God promised His people, "I will...sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness...and I will give you a new heart and...put my Spirit within you and make you walk in My statutes and be careful to obey My rules." Jesus was referring to the New Covenant that was about to come true in His blood, a promise Nicodemus had known since boyhood. But like all the religious leaders of Israel, he was an apostate Jew who, because he hadn't experienced the miracle of new life, had given up on God's promise. And once you do that, what do you do next?

You reject what the Bible says about sin. After all, we are all "good kids" with good hearts, aren't we? The answer is no! The truth is there's not

one good person among us. But once you admit that, that we all deserve eternal punishment in hell, how do you cope with the fear? Answer: You ask God for the gift of faith to believe His promise of new life and forgiveness!

The second clue is in verse 8 where Jesus adds, “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Have you ever done that? Stood outside surrounded by the beauty of God's creation and heard His wind roaring through the trees? I did that the other night. I was outside watering the flowers when I suddenly heard and then felt a cool breeze blowing past me. I thought, "What a perfect way to describe the power and refreshment of the Holy Spirit!" I didn't know where it came from or where it was going. Nor could I control it! Ever tried to get the wind to blow when you want to fly a kite?

But I felt the results of it! And you can also see the results when the Holy Spirit touches someone's life because what happens? Just as the dead man heard Jesus say, “Lazarus, come forth!” I sensed someone saying – not audibly, but just as real - saying, “Gary, believe!” And for the first time in my life, I believed in Jesus – His Lordship, His death for my sins on the cross, His resurrection. And in that very moment, my spirit, which had been dead, came to life, and I’ve been following Him ever since.

But what about Nicodemus? Was he ever born from above? John doesn't say. Nicodemus fades from the scene midway through this chapter, and we don't hear from him again until chapter 7 where his colleagues on the Council decide that Jesus has to go. But he takes issue with them on a point of Law. John 7:50, “Nicodemus, who had gone to Him before and was one of them, said to them, ‘Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what He does?’” So he hasn't taken a public stand for Him yet, but I'm feeling better about him. Aren't you?

The last we read of him is John 19:38 following the crucifixion. He and a rich friend named Joseph of Arimathea summon up the courage to ask Pilate for the body of Jesus, so they can prepare it for burial and lay it in a new tomb that belongs to Joseph. Now I'm starting to love this guy due to his loyalty and love for Jesus! But that's all the Bible says about him.

Thankfully, church tradition fills in the rest of the details. It reports, for example, that Nicodemus was the only person who stood up for Jesus at

His trial, that he was baptized after the Resurrection by Peter and John, and that his preaching of Christ was so powerful that the Sanhedrin he served removed him from his position as teacher, confiscated his property, banished him from Israel, and subjected his wife and children to abject poverty. His daughter was so poor it's said she had to dig through the dung piles to find a few pieces of grain to eat. A rabbi saw her doing so and took pity on her. "Who are you?" he asked. "I am the daughter of Nicodemus." "Whatever happened to him?" he asked. "He became a follower of Jesus and was banished from Israel." So the rabbi refused to help her.

As for Nicodemus himself, he became one of the first martyrs of the church, beaten to death by a mob for preaching in the name of Jesus. That's the story of Nic at night. He had everything and gave up everything to gain what the world cannot take away. So even though John doesn't give us the details, we have our answer: His sins were washed away and he was given new life from above. For so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.