

Jesus Among the Theologians

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Date: 13 March 2011

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[0 : 00] Remain standing, let's pray. Father, we pray that you might help us understand these scriptures this morning, that we might learn and understand how to live rightly before you and learn more of your Son.

We pray this in his name. Amen. Well, please sit down, friends. Now, I need to tell you this morning that today's talk is going to be a little different.

I've taken a different approach, so let me tell you what I've done. I've taken a good look at the text of John 3, and I've tried to work out what it means. And, of course, as you know, the text centres on Nicodemus.

Nicodemus is a first-century Jew of some standing. In one sense, Nicodemus is a representative of a large number of good, godly Jews of his day. And because of this, what I've tried to do is try and get inside his brain and imagine what might have been going on as he met Jesus.

And I've tried to explain what the words of Jesus mean in this passage. Now, to do this, and this is where some of you will like this, some won't, but I warn you about that ahead of time, I've created a little story based on the passage.

[1 : 13] And whatever information we have from elsewhere in the New Testament about Nicodemus. And I'm not actually going to refer to the verses, but I want you to have your Bibles open and to follow with me.

So please open your Bibles at John 3. Now, if you've got a sermon outline, this is one of those days where it's really going to help you, because what I've done is in the sermon outline, is I've listed where I've got the information from and some passages you might like to look up later.

So helpful themes and verses are out on the outline, and I would encourage you to go through it again later and check them out. So with that introduction, let's get underway. Nicodemus listened to the sound of his wife's breathing, and he rolled over again in his bed, and how he wished he could sleep.

But sleep wouldn't come. He couldn't settle down. He was restless, and his mind could find no peace. He knew that morning would arrive soon, and that his mind would still be going around and around in circles, as it had done for a number of hours already.

And so he gave up, and he just waited for the dawn. And as he waited, he went over the events of the past few weeks yet again. He was Nicodemus. Nicodemus, the Pharisee, the teacher of the ignorant, a member of the most pious, God-fearing group of Jews.

[2 : 27] He was Nicodemus, a respected member of the Sanhedrin, that is, the ruling council of the Jews. He knew it all. He had no one to fear, except perhaps the Romans, and he was secure in his religious faith.

And even as many of the new religious phenomena came and went, Nicodemus could not be shifted. You see, as the population went after these new and trendy religious leaders who made great promises, Nicodemus didn't.

He stood firm. At this time of great religious and social upheaval, he stuck to what he knew to be the certainties of life. He held on to that old faith, that faith founded on the scriptures, that faith which firmly rested on Moses and the prophets.

And then it happened. Two new religious men appeared. First, there was that wild prophet-like man who went about baptising people in the River Jordan, and he was persuasive enough.

In fact, some of his contemporaries wondered if he might be the king that they were looking for, and so they wondered if he might be the Messiah, the King of God, the Christ of God, and so they went out or sent people out to check him out.

[3 : 31] They talked with him. They asked him straight out who he was. And John, to give him credit, was equally straight with him. He was not the Christ. He was not Elijah.

He was not a prophet like Moses. But he did admit to something. He spoke of another one who was coming after him, the one he was preparing the way for. He said, I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness.

Make straight the way of the Lord. And when he spoke of this coming one, he used incredible and dramatic language. He spoke of him as God's Lamb who takes away the sin of the world.

He claimed that this coming one was greater even than he, because he had existed before him. John claimed that he was one who would dispense the Spirit. He said, Look, I baptise you with water, but among you stands one who comes after me, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.

He has surpassed me because, well, he was before me. This man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who were baptised with the Holy Spirit. And I have seen and I testify that this man is the Son of God.

[4 : 41] And then this coming one, Jesus, appeared on the scene. And in his own way, he was more unusual than John. You see, he walked straight into the temple as though he owned it.

He gathered a group of disciples. He performed miracles. He taught. And the more Nicodemus heard of his teaching, the more he was impressed, for he taught as one with authority. He spoke about God with freshness and intimacy.

Nicodemus had never heard such teaching before. And the more Nicodemus listened, the more he wondered. This man had something special. This man, you see, was not run of the mill.

This man was a great one. Perhaps this man was a man like Moses. Perhaps he was another Jeremiah. Whoever he was, God was with him like he was with those great ones of old.

This man was in their company. He was a great teacher, a man sent from God like the men of old. And so Nicodemus began to just move in his shift in his thinking. And like many other Jews, he believed in Jesus because of what he was doing.

[5 : 46] And like many others, he wanted to find out more. Nicodemus was curious. And his curiosity moved him to action. He grew more and more determined and particularly determined to meet this man face to face.

And so he arranged it. He arranged to meet with Jesus earlier on that very night. And Nicodemus remembered back to the appointment. He remembered finding the place at night.

He remembered walking in. He remembered how the shocks came thick and fast for him. The first shock was that suddenly he felt very small. He was used, you see, to respect and honour.

He was used to the frills that went with his position in Jewish society. And all of a sudden, he was not on top of things. You see, he was used to, all of a sudden, he was feeling inadequate.

He was no longer the teacher of Israel, but he was an infant back at school. And it all started with the very first words. He had this speech all prepared.

[6 : 46] It was a speech which praised Jesus as it was appropriate for meeting a great man. It gave him all the recognition of the great one that he obviously was. He said, Rabbi, we know you're a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform the miraculous signs you're doing if God were not with him.

And Jesus just cut through it all. He saw the real question and he met it head on and he said, I tell you the truth. No one can see the kingdom of God unless he's born again.

Now, at this point, Nicodemus' prepared speech and conduct just went straight out the window. He began to feel helpless. He'd been caught off guard. He didn't quite know what to say. And so, he blurted back this response.

How can a man be born again when he's old? Surely he can't enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born. And now as he remembered it, Nicodemus felt the embarrassment and shame creep over him.

You see, it was not a question or a comment of a man of knowledge. It betrayed his ignorance and Jesus knew it and his reply demonstrated that he knew it.

[7 : 55] For he said, I tell you the truth. No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he's born of water and of the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh. Spirit gives birth to spirit.

You should not be surprised at my saying, you must be born again. As he thought about it now, Nicodemus knew that Jesus shouldn't have caught him off guard like this.

You see, it was as though he was saying new things. But others before him had talked about the very same things. They talked about being children of God. For example, Moses had talked about Israel as God's firstborn son and of God as the father of Israel and King David had been known as the son of God and Psalm 2 had talked about him being begotten by God.

In the same way, others had talked about the role of God's Spirit. Prophets like Ezekiel and Joel had promised that God would pour out his Spirit. Ezekiel's prophecy was particularly clear.

I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean and I will cleanse you from all your impurities and all your idols and I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you and I will remove from you the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh and I will put my spirit within you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

[9 : 16] And even in the last two centuries, Jewish scholars had actually talked in similar language to that Jesus used here. They too had combined water, spirit, children of God.

One of them had said, I will create in them a Holy Spirit and I will cleanse them and I'll be their father and they shall be my children. And another had said, He will cleanse him from all wicked deeds by means of a Holy Spirit like purifying waters he will sprinkle upon him the Spirit of truth.

But the thing is, you see, when Jesus said it, it shook you inside. It wasn't dry and distant theology with him.

He said it provocatively, sharply, powerfully and it shocked you to the core and although he felt threatened, Nicodemus understood Jesus in a way and not understood the others.

Nicodemus rehearsed it again in his mind as he tossed and turned. He, Nicodemus, had been born a first time from an endless succession of good Jewish stock.

[10 : 20] His parents, both good Jews, had begotten him. Through being begotten he had entered into the kingdom of this world. The point is, ordinary life comes through ordinary earthly parents.

Jesus' point was though that this wasn't enough. It wasn't good enough to be born from below. It wasn't even good enough if that was from good Jewish stock. Jess was saying that Nicodemus needed to be born again.

That is, he needed to be born from above. He needed to be born by a heavenly, begotten by a heavenly father. He needed a second birth by the spirit and that results in entrance not into the kingdom of men but the kingdom of God.

Earthly life comes from an earthly father. Heavenly life comes from a heavenly father. and then Nicodemus smiled because he remembered the illustration Jesus had used.

He smiled because he'd remember it till the end of his days. They stood in the cool of the evening and Jesus had stopped and he pointed to the trees rustling in the evening breeze and he said, look at that Nicodemus, do you see the trees moving?

[11 : 36] Do you see how the wind blows through them and it blows wherever it wishes? You hear it sound but you can't tell where it comes from nor where it's going.

Well, being born of the spirit is just like that and as he thought about it later, Nicodemus understood. You see, when God created human beings, he made them out of dust and God had breathed onto that pile of dust and given them life and the breath or the wind or the spirit is the thing that makes people human.

Without it, they'd be dead. Well, now what he understood about Jesus, what Jesus was saying was that there's a sort of spiritual equivalent to that which happened back in the garden. You see, without God's spirit to give him life, he'd be spiritually no more than a pile of dust and spiritually dead.

To become a spiritual being, a member of the kingdom of God, what he needed was God's spirit to blow upon him. He needed to be born again into this new spiritual existence and by using this illustration, Jesus was saying that Nicodemus might not know how it happened.

He might not know exactly why it happened with some and not with others, just like the wind in the trees, but this didn't make it any less real nor did it make it any less essential.

[12 : 55] The spirit must be at work if a person is to be under the control of God and it seemed to make sense now. In fact, the more that he thought about it, the more it made sense to him and the more he thought about it, the more he felt under threat.

You see, he realised that Jesus was pulling the earth underneath his good Jewish feet. He realised that Jesus was undermining the very roots of his existence. He was threatening hundreds and hundreds of years of traditional Jewish understanding and that last statement he made put the last bomb under Nicodemus and his Jewish friends and he remembered that final crushing condemnation and now he shrank in shame even as he remembered it.

You are Israel's teacher and you don't understand. Well, I tell you the truth. We speak of what we have seen but still you people don't accept our testimony.

I have spoken to you of earthly things and you don't believe. How are you going to believe if I speak to you of heavenly things? And then he remembered that statement. No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who's from heaven the Son of Man.

Just as the Son of Man lifted up the snake in the desert just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert so the Son of Man must be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

[14 : 17] Now there was no mistaking what Jesus was saying. If a person wanted to find out who God was that is if they wanted to know well what is God actually like? If they wanted to know what does God demand or ask of us well the best way to find out would be wouldn't it to go up into heaven and to ask him and then come back so he could tell the others.

No one in all of history in Jewish faith had ever done this. God's people knew no one anywhere who'd done this. No one had ever ascended to God and come back.

And therefore there's no one who could speak with absolute authority about God and his demands. And then Jesus gave the most shattering claim Nicodemus had ever heard uttered. And this was the claim that shook him.

For Jesus pushed on to say well he'd done even more than this. It was true no one had gone into heaven and come back. But there is one who has come from heaven which is where his origin is.

Jesus the son of man and he had revealed God. He was the revealer of God. He's the only one who could reveal truth and ultimate authority. And this Jesus is facing him now and was saying I tell you what I have seen.

[15 : 37] It's hard for you to understand because none of you have ascended into heaven to discover them but I've come down from heaven and I speak with ultimate and unique authority and I can tell you what God is like.

And I can tell you what God demands. But he didn't stop there. He went on a lot further. He spoke of being lifted up, being placed by God in such a high place that everyone might look at him and he reminded Nicodemus of the incident in the wilderness.

You know the time when the people of God had become impatient with God and with his prophet Moses that grumbled and complained and God had sent venomous snakes among them and many Israelites died that day.

They realised their mistake. They turned back from it. They repented. They asked Moses to pray and he did what he characteristically did, sought God's mercy and God acted in mercy. And he told Moses to make a snake out of bronze and to put it up on this pole.

And he then said to put the pole in a place where it could be seen by all people and anyone who looked on the bronze snake would live. And Jesus claimed, it's like that with me.

[16 : 45] I'm like the snake. I am to be lifted up. And being lifted up is part of God's plan to give life and salvation for the world. In being lifted up, I'll be put on public display like that snake so that all you have to do is look at me.

And everyone who looks upon me as I'm lifted up will be saved. Now Nicodemus didn't understand this part. He's not sure what being lifted up meant.

Nor were the disciples of Jesus. But years later they did understand. They understood that Jesus was speaking of his death on the cross. That God had sent him to earth.

And that he'd come to reveal God. And he'd come to bring people back to relationship with God. And he did this by dying on a cross for sins. And everyone who looks on this, on him, on the cross, dying for sin, everyone who believes that his death is a death that brings to God shall be born from above.

Born of the spirit. Born anew. Born into a heavenly existence. Born of a heavenly father. Made children of the living God.

[18 : 03] But in the meantime, Nicodemus continued to toss and turn and to think and he wondered what it would mean to believe in Jesus as the one greater than Moses, greater than the prophets, greater than John the Baptist.

He wondered what it would mean to believe in Jesus as the one who existed before any of them ever existed. And who came from heaven to show exactly what God was like. And he wondered what believing in Jesus would cost him.

He knew there'd be a cost and yet, yet he was just captivated by Jesus. And he couldn't stop thinking about the man. And his last thoughts as he dozed off to sleep were ones that would haunt him again and again in the next few months and years.

They would bug him as he defended Jesus against his Sanhedrin friends. And as he tried to protect him and as he and Joseph dragged his body broken down from the cross and embalmed it.

Who is this man? Why did he die? What am I going to do with him? And all the possible answers echoed around in his mind.

[19 : 13] Who is this man? Is he just another man? Is he a great teacher? Is he a man from God, a miracle worker, the son of man, the revealer of God, the saviour of the world? Who is he? And why did he die?

Was this just an unfortunate mistake? Was it the result of jealousy or malice? Was it unplanned by God? But planned by men? Or was it the planned for death of the son of man, the sent one?

Was it a death for sin? Why did he die? And then that last question, what am I going to do with him? Am I going to just remain a person who just thinks of him as a great teacher, a miracle worker, a person that God was with in some strange way?

Or am I going to believe he's the heavenly son of man, the source of real life, the one to whom I must look if I'm to be born again, the one to whom I must give my allegiance and devotion? Now whatever he did, Nicodemus knew one thing was beyond a shadow of a doubt.

He knew that the man he'd met that night was not a man you could ignore. Friends, I want just this morning for us to stop and think. We've spent a number of weeks now in John's Gospel, and I wonder what you think of the man that we've met.

[20 : 25] What do you think? Who is this man who has confronted you in these past few weeks as we've worked our way through this book? Is this man just another man?

A great teacher, a good, a great man, a man from God even like other men from God, a miracle worker, ultimate man of justice, a model man? Or is he the son of man, the revealer of God, the saviour of the world, the crucified God in one sense?

Who is this man? And the second question, why did he die? Was his death just an unfortunate mistake? Or was it the result of jealousy and malice?

Was it a model of life, how to live life before others in the world? Was it unplanned by God but planned by men? Or was it the planned death of the son of man, the sent one?

Was it a death to sin? Why did he die? And that last question, this is the hardest one of all, what are you going to do with this man Jesus? Are you going to remain as a person who thinks of him as a great teacher, a miracle worker, a person that God was with in some strange way?

[21 : 39] Or are you going to believe in him as the heavenly son of man, the source of real life, the revealer of God, the one to whom you must look if you're to be born again, the one to whom you must give your allegiance and devotion?

What are you going to do with this man Jesus? And just remember, whatever you do, he's not a man you can afford to ignore. Friends, these questions are not just questions you ask once, let me say, they're questions that will come to you time and time again in life.

That's why I loved Diana's response in the dying moments of her life. those last few days. She said, no, Andrew, I'm still confident in the Lord Jesus.

She kept asking the question until that last day because it is so important. These are the questions that will come to you time and time in life. Let me urge you to ask them again. Let me urge you to ask them to act appropriately with freshness each time you find conclusions.

And friends, if there are some of you here who haven't yet come to a conclusion about this, then let me urge you to read John's gospel and to keep asking the questions. Who is this Jesus?

[22 : 54] What am I going to do with him? And I can tell you now, if you keep asking of John's gospel, John won't let you down. He'll give you some answers. So keep asking, read John's gospel and find out.

Let's pray. Thank you.