

Encounters With Jesus(3) Nicodemus - The Entrance To The Kingdom

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[0 : 00] where we find an account of the Lord's encounter with Nicodemus or Nicodemus' encounter with the Lord, whichever way you want to look at it. And as you find this very well-known, indeed probably one of the most famous encounters with Jesus recorded in the Bible, we're going to look at some of the features of it this evening to see how Jesus dealt with this man Nicodemus.

Now you notice how chapter 2 ends, the emphasis there at the end of chapter 2. We didn't read that part, but from verse 23 there, especially verse 24.

Well, verse 23 says, Many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing, that's the miracles. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

In other words, Jesus knew that not all those who were following him outwardly had actually come to spiritual recognition of him and acceptance of him as saviour.

But you notice how that runs immediately into this third chapter. The chapters, of course, are chapters, divisions are, over the years have been brought in by translators, and they're very useful.

[1 : 27] But sometimes you get them just in the way of the way that, standing in the way of how the thought of the passage is run. So he's saying here that he needed no one to bear witness about man, that's mankind, man in general, for he himself knew what was in man.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus. So from an emphasis that Jesus knows all that is in our human hearts, all that is in us as mankind, man and female, man or woman, he then says now here is an example of that sort of thing.

Here is a man, Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, who came by Jesus a night, by night, and to whom Jesus said that he needed to be born again.

He knew what was in him. He knew his need instantly. And as he detected that, so he specified for Nicodemus, where in fact he was still seriously lacking in his life.

Two things I want to set before you this evening, and a number of points under each of those, especially the second one. First of all, Nicodemus came to Jesus in the dark.

[2 : 45] He came to Jesus in the dark. Secondly, Nicodemus was led by Jesus into the light. Now we're talking here spiritually. He came to Jesus in the dark, and you can see how that's specified literally, that he came to Jesus by night in verse 2.

And he said to him, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, and so on. Now that could mean, just as it says, naturally that he came under the cover of darkness. And we could say, as some think, that maybe John is just recording for us the fear that Nicodemus had in his position, as a ruler of the Jews, as a member of the ruling Sanhedrin of the Jews, these spiritual leaders at the time.

And that he was afraid that if somebody found out that he had gone to see this Jesus, who was being rejected by the leadership then, that he would himself be found accused of actually siding with the likes of Jesus.

But in actual fact, while that may have been a feature, I think there's much more than that in what John is saying, because it's John's gospel, after all, that makes such a great use of the metaphor of light as against darkness.

Let me just point out a number of points and places in the gospel of John where you find that. If you follow me through to these, you can see in chapter 8, for example, in verse 12, Jesus spoke to them, that's the Jews that were there before him, Jesus spoke to them saying, I am the light of the world.

[4 : 19] Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. You can see, obviously, he's talking there spiritually and morally. It's not natural darkness. He's talking about spiritual darkness and spiritual light.

And then when you go forward to the next chapter, the healing of the man that was born blind has a relation to spiritual sight, spiritually seeing, being in the light. If you look at verses 4 and 5 there, you can see, we must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day, night is coming when no one can work.

As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world. Now, this Jesus is again referring to spiritual light or to light and darkness in a spiritual way.

And we go forward to chapter 12. I'm only just going to pick out this last third one. Chapter 12 and at verse 35, you can see here that John is actually dealing with the end of Jesus' public ministry in the world.

He's been working all these miracles. He's been teaching as these discourses and passages in John so eloquently tell us. And when he's coming now to the point where he's going to bring his disciples to be with him in the room before he goes out to be examined and then passed on for crucifixion, here is Jesus saying, these are really his final words, if you like, publicly in the world at verse 35.

[5 : 50] You can see how he speaks there where he's saying, the light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you.

The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he's going. While you have the light, believe in the light that you may become sons of light. What a great verse that is.

What a tremendously evangelistic verse that is. The emphasis really that you find in the gospel so frequently because that's essentially the gospel message.

While you have the light, while you have access to the light, while you have the opportunity to get to know the light and to live in the light, believe, he says, in the light that you may become the sons or the children of light.

There's John and an example of the passages that deal with light in a spiritual way, light and darkness. When you come back to chapter 3, you can see in verses 19 to 21 how you have a very similar thing following on from the beginning of the chapter here.

[6 : 56] Verse 19, this is the judgment that light has come into the world and people love the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light lest his deeds should be exposed.

But whoever does what is true or does the truth comes to the light so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God. And so that passage is obviously very closely related not only to the other passages but to the emphasis of Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night.

In other words, he was a teacher, as you see in verse 1. He was a, in verse 10, and he was a ruler of the Jews. In fact, in verse 10, Jesus is saying, are you the teacher of Israel?

Are you a prominent teacher of Israel? He was a man who knew his Bible so well. His Bible being the Old Testament of course at that point. And what Jesus is saying to him effectively is this, you know your Bible so well, Nicodemus, you're actually teaching other people from these scriptures but you still don't know God.

And you don't know me. And you haven't recognized me for who I am. And you haven't actually reckoned with the passages in your scriptures that speak about me, that prophesied about me and my coming.

[8 : 20] Here he is laying his finger on where Nicodemus is seriously defective. Which is why, as we'll see, he goes on to speak about being born again, being born of water and of the Spirit so as to enter into the kingdom of God.

Here's a man who has this tremendous advantage, this tremendous ability, who has this ability to teach others the things of scripture. He's not saved at that point.

He doesn't know the Lord. And that of course is a reminder to myself and to yourselves that we can know our Bible very well but still not be saved.

We can be able to pick things out of the Bible and tell others about them and still not know God personally for ourselves as our Savior. So you look to your own life tonight and examine this very crucial matter for yourself.

You all know your Bibles very well, some of you better than I do. And I know the Bible reasonably well so as to be able to preach from it but I have to say to myself, do I know God?

[9 : 32] Do I know this Jesus as my Savior? Have I come into the light? Have I come out of the darkness of my sin? Have I been born again?

And he didn't just come to him by night. There's a second point here under Jesus coming, Nicodemus coming to Jesus in the dark. He didn't just come to him with an emphasis on him still being in spiritual darkness.

He came secondly with an interest in Jesus. Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God for no one can do these signs, these miracles that you are doing unless God is with him.

Now he's still very far short of really recognizing who Jesus is. He doesn't realize yet that Jesus is actually God, that he's the Son of God, that he's the eternal Son of God.

But he recognizes something in Jesus that has caught his attention, that he wants to explore further. And he has come to Jesus to ask this of him. Well, it's not really in the form of a question, but it's not difficult to know what his interest was, that Jesus would actually enlarge on this for him.

[10 : 44] Who exactly are you? What should we make of you? How are you able to do these miracles? miracles, because we know that you couldn't do them if God is not with you.

So he's a bit puzzled and interested and drawn to this Jesus. And so are you. Surely impossible to be under the gospel and not be drawn to Jesus.

Because whatever type of preaching we're under, we know the Bible, and we know the Bible is actually presenting Christ to us in the clarity with which the Bible itself does that.

And as he wanted to know more and to establish further who Jesus was and what Jesus was here to do, surely that's our interest tonight, isn't it?

isn't that really what is true of every Christian as well as those who are inquiring, those who are seeking further knowledge about Jesus.

[11 : 48] That's really what the Christian life is about too. Because when you come to look at, for example, the testimony that Paul gave of his own conversion in Philippians chapter 3, he goes through a list of things there that he was as to his birth, as to his upbringing, as to the way that he himself as a Pharisee, as a Hebrew of the Hebrews, how he was so committed to the law of God, to ensuring that others kept the law of God, how impeccable he was himself in seeking to keep that law perfectly as much as possible.

But then he says, I count all of that now, but loss. Indeed, I count it as worthless. Using very strong language. Why? What was the purpose of Paul turning his back on that way of seeking to please God by his own efforts that had been his lot in life up till then?

Why would he now be able to say, how is he now able to say, these things I count but loss so that I might gain Christ? And then he tells us, so that I might have him, so that I might gain him, so that I might have this righteousness that comes with him.

But then he finishes that string of reasons as to why he's turned his back on self righteousness and self made salvation should there be such a thing. So that I might know him and the power of his resurrection.

Isn't that why you're here this evening? Because you want to know him and even if you already know him, you want to know him more. And however much you've advanced in knowing him from the time you first came to know him, you still want to know him more and you want to know him better.

[13 : 39] And it's a characteristic of your life that you're not satisfied with the level of knowledge that you have even now of Christ. The level of experience you have of him dealing with the things of your soul and the things of your eternity.

You're here to learn more about him. You're here to meet with him again, to have another encounter with him. that marks you as a Christian, that that's the desire of your heart, that that's the bent of your mind, that you might know him, the power of his resurrection.

Well, do you know him in that way? Is that really the desire of your heart? Here is Nicodemus, he came to Jesus in the dark.

Is there anyone at all here still in the dark spiritually, in terms of salvation, in terms of knowing the Lord as the Savior, in terms of knowing his salvation, embracing yourself and bringing you into the kingdom?

Well, listen on and hear what he said to Nicodemus. And if there is anyone here at all that's still unsaved, I hope and pray as God's people do, that we will not leave this place tonight in an unsaved condition.

[14:57] that we will not leave this place tonight and not be born again. And that our interest that's taken us here tonight will lead in this encounter with Jesus that we have in the gospel, will come to our knowing him as our Savior too.

He came to Jesus in the dark. But secondly, he was led by Jesus into the light. This is how Jesus responded in verse 3. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

And then in the second part of his response after Nicodemus had incredulously responded to that, Jesus says in verse 5, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Now let's just pause for a wee minute and ask what did he mean by the kingdom of God? God. Because rebirth, what Jesus is speaking about here, is crucial in terms of entry to and belonging to the kingdom of God.

But what do you understand when you come to the likes of the gospel here and elsewhere and read the kingdom of God? What is that? What does that mean? Because it's important that you and I would belong to it, that you and I would be inside it, that we be subjects in this kingdom of God.

[16:17] Well, of course, in one sense, the kingdom of God, the kingship of God, if you like, is universal. Everybody is under the kingship of God, the sovereign kingship of God that covers every single human being of every age.

But when you come to the Bible and when you come to the Old Testament, you actually see the likes of Psalm 2 or the prophecy of Zechariah 9, verses 9 to 10.

I'm not going to look them up just now, but you can follow them through yourself. Psalm 2, which we know very well. But in the likes of these passages in the Old Testament that speak about a king that was still to come and a kingdom over which he would rule, that has been fulfilled as we see very often in the New Testament specifically in Christ.

So there is a kingdom, as Jesus in fact said to, in John's gospel, said to Pontius Pilate when he was being examined, my kingdom is not of this world.

There is a kingdom over which Jesus is king, this kingdom of God where God has placed his son, as in Psalm 2, over this kingdom, and the subjects of that kingdom are all those who have come to recognize and accept him as the king of their lives.

[17:40] And how do you come to enter this kingdom? How do you come to see this kingdom? And as he says here, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Jesus meant by the word see, he meant to be a partaker of the life of this kingdom, this eternal life that characterizes this kingdom of God over which Jesus has been installed as king.

You cannot enter, he says, the kingdom of God. You see the same emphasis on eternal life in verse 15. That's the life of this kingdom, the thing that you come into possession of when you've come to enter into this kingdom.

That's why it's so important what Jesus is saying here to him, not just a reference to the kingdom, but how we enter it. Except one be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

God. We are all under the kingship of God in the wider sense, but we need to be born again in order to enter into this kingdom, this more specific kingdom where Christ is king in a salvation sense. God. And there's a little bit of a difficulty here because in Greek the word that's translated there again can also mean from above.

[19:08] Except a man be born from above, except one, that's a man or woman, except we be born again, or you could say except we be born from above.

And John has a habit actually of building two meanings of one word into a passage. And that's perfectly acceptable in this context as well. It's perfectly acceptable to say that this is actually intended by John.

Because born again means born in addition to our natural birth. Born in a spiritual sense. Given birth to by God's power, as we'll see by his spirit.

But born from above because that birth comes from God. That power, that energy that brings us to be born again. It's not something we create.

It's not something we're able to actually produce ourselves so that we just create an entrance into the kingdom for ourselves. It is born from above, born by the spirit of God.

[20 : 16] And that's where we need to take verse 5 into account as well. Unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. Now that's just one entity.

It's not just born of water and then secondly born of the spirit. He means born of the spirit of God and Nicodemus was obviously being pointed back to the Old Testament scriptures that he knew so well in order to find this concept that Jesus was speaking about.

And in fact when Jesus said to him, are you the teacher of Israel and you don't know these things? He's really accusing Nicodemus of not knowing his scriptures at all well because he's saying to him, if you really had examined the scriptures about the coming of the Savior, you would have seen combined in some of these scriptures an emphasis on washing from sin as well as being given a new heart.

Let me just take you to one of these passages in the prophecy of Ezekiel and chapter 36. Let me just turn for a moment to that.

The prophecy of Ezekiel chapter 36 and especially from verse 25. God's promise to his people at that time.

[21 : 43] I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses and from all your idols I will cleanse you and I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh and I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Now you see that combination in that passage of cleansing, of washing, of spiritual cleansing from uncleanness that God is promising to his people but it's accompanied by it's part and partial of the same that he is saying I will give you a new heart, I will put my spirit within you.

It's not an accident and it's significant that the next chapter in Ezekiel deals with the valley of the dry bones where in prophesying to these dead bones Ezekiel was told by God prophesy to them, call to the wind, call to the spirit and they came to life and they came to be reestablished as a great mass of human beings.

That's an illustration of God raising us spiritually from the dead and putting his spirit within us. Now you recall from Ephesians chapter 2 that the emphasis there is very much on our being dead in our trespasses and since that's where the need to be born again, the need to be spiritually brought to life arises from that deadness that is ours as sinners.

Here is Jesus saying to Nicodemus, except a man be born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. to enter the kingdom of God means to have the spirit of God come with his energy to wash you from your sins and thereby to bring you into the kingdom of God, to bring you into salvation.

[23 : 47] That's what he's really talking about in the need to be born again. That's the entrance to the kingdom of God. That's the entrance to life.

As far as we're concerned, that's where it begins for us. in a new birth. That's why it's absolutely crucial that we hold on to these teachings as a church and as Christians because they are not by any means held on to by all aspects of the church in today's world.

And if you come across teaching that says this is actually out of date, there's no need for that radical change that people once thought was meant by being born again, you've got heresy.

You've got something which contradicts the very teaching of Jesus himself. And remember what we said at the beginning. No one knows what is in man the way that Jesus does.

He knew what we need to be brought into the kingdom. He knew what we need to be brought to life and to possess life. And therefore it is he who says, the one who knows what's in man, except one be born again by water and the spirit, of water and of the spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

[25 : 15] You see, so that's telling you, you don't try and save yourself. You can't do it anyway. You don't try and educate yourself into the kingdom of God. You can't do that either, however much you know your Bible.

He was a very educated man, this man who knew the Old Testament scriptures so well, but he's not saved. He doesn't know God. He's not in the kingdom. And he's surprised when Jesus comes and tells him, as we'll see in a minute in his reaction, that actually he's still outside of the kingdom of God.

And Nicodemus had assumed that he and his fellow Sanhedrin members at least would surely be in the kingdom of God. After all, they were teaching others about God and about the scriptures, from the scriptures.

But Jesus is saying, you need to be born again. You need more than education. You need more than intellectual ability. You need more than natural gifts.

You need the Spirit of God. The work of the Spirit of God. the energy of the Spirit of the creative might of the Spirit of God to create that life, to bring you to life, to bring you into the kingdom through being born again.

[26 : 34] And you can see Nicodemus' reaction. We need to move on to verses 4 and verse 9. Nicodemus says in verse 4 there, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?

And Nicodemus at that stage is not just rejecting what Jesus is saying and having difficulty with, he is actually somewhat scornful. And he is more or less saying, this man doesn't really know what he is talking about.

He is talking about something entirely impossible. It is ludicrous what he is saying to be born again. How can you do that? And then verse 9, How can these things be?

Well you know that is because as we said we need to be born again before we really begin to understand things of the kingdom. Remember in 1 Corinthians where Paul was writing to the Corinthian church and dealing there with how we need actually to have the spirit of God come to open our minds and our hearts in order to actually receive the truth of God and accept the truth of God as it is.

In 1 Corinthians 2 verse 14, the natural person, by that he means the person that doesn't have the spirit of God. The natural person does not accept the things of the spirit of God for they are foolishness to him and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

[28 : 03] What is it that lies beneath the rejection of Christ and of the gospel by so many out in the world today educated people, intellectually endowed people, people who are so skilled in so many ways and have so many gifts because they don't have the spirit of God.

Paul went on to say because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things but he himself as judge by no one.

And he says there where God has actually given us the spirit that's where we come really to understand the things because they are spiritually discerned.

He says they are of the spirit in verse 14. The things of the spirit of God, they are spiritually discerned. It means not that you have a great ability theologically but it means they are discerned discerned by means of the spirit of God being in you and having given you a new heart and insight into the truth of God.

And if we follow that into this passage in John's gospel, you can see there in verse 6 as Jesus says, that which is born of the flesh is flesh, that which is born of the spirit is spirit.

[29 : 34] The highest human ability still issues or results only in flesh, what is like itself. Like produces like.

But that which is born of the spirit is spirit. It is like God. It is eternal life. It is that which bears the very image of God, the stamp of God in it.

And in his commentary on John's gospel, the American commentator Don Carson says as follows, and I've taken this quote because I think it's really very apt and very well put.

Nicodemus had found Jesus' teaching hard to understand. But Jesus turns that incredulity into a fundamentally Christological question.

You see, that's what he means by that is that Nicodemus' incredulity, his disbelief in what Jesus was saying and accepting it, Jesus actually turned that, he says, into a fundamentally Christological question.

[30 : 42] A question about Jesus himself as to who he is and what he's here for. And then he goes on to say Nicodemus had approached Jesus with a certain amount of respect, but he had not even begun to appreciate who Jesus really was.

And he says this, at bottom, Nicodemus' failure was not a failure of intellect, but a failure to believe Jesus' witness to himself.

The failure to believe was more reprehensible than the failure to understand, since it betrayed a fundamentally inadequate appreciation of who Jesus is.

You see, the problem with Nicodemus was not that he wasn't of sufficient intellect to understand. The problem was that his intellect needed to be opened. He lacked the Spirit of God. He needed to be born again in order to enter the kingdom of God. So finally, our encounter with Jesus.

[31 : 49] We mentioned earlier in our study this evening, that's exactly what's taking place here this evening, if we truly believe the gospel to be what it is. It is an encounter with Jesus.

It's an encounter with the Christ of the gospels, who is still the living Christ, who lives, as it were, through his word and comes to confront us, to encounter us in our circumstances.

There's no theory. This is not something that's just been invented by theologians and is no longer relevant to our age, a relic of Victorian age or back to the age of the Puritans.

Here and now, here in this building, Jesus is encountered by each one of us through the gospel. And in verse 7, he uses the word plural in the word you.

Do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born again. John is really capturing there the universal call of Christ in the gospel.

[32 : 52] He's saying to us all, you must be born again. You, all of you, must take account of this, is what he's saying there to John. And so it applies to all of us tonight.

What has our encounter with Jesus been about? What has it resulted in? What are we going to make of it? If you go back, just one more verse to bring before you in chapter 1 and verses 11 to 13. And these are important verses in relation to what we're looking at this evening. It follows on from another reference to the light in verse 9. That's Jesus coming into the world. And then verse 11, he came to his own and his own people did not receive him.

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood, not of the will of the flesh, not of the will of man, but of God.

Who were, in other words, born again, born from above, born of water and of the Spirit. You cannot create that rebirth. You cannot create that entrance into the kingdom yourself.

[34 : 03] But you notice what it's saying there. It's not asking us to create it ourselves, to do it yourself. Our responsibility is otherwise.

Because it mentions there, to all who received him, who believed in his name. You see, the gospel does not address our ability to enter the kingdom.

We don't have that. The gospel addresses our responsibility, not our ability. That's what we need to major on.

Though we believe fully in the sovereignty of God in rebirth, the wind blows where it wills. You cannot hear, you hear it sound, you don't know where it comes from or where it goes.

And even with the technology available to us today, there's still a mystery about the wind and the weather. How much more in the days of John. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

[35 : 08] We cannot actually catch the mystery of the work of the Spirit of God and say, that's something I now fully understand. That's God's side of it. But John is focusing on our responsibility, not our ability.

When he's saying our responsibility is to believe in Christ, to receive Christ, and in our encounter with Christ, to bring him into our possession believingly.

That's our responsibility, which we cannot evade. And so tonight, again, here's the question. Are we born again?

If not, don't get uptight and worried about it. You can't bring it about anyway. There's no point in worrying about it in that sense.

But do something about it. And what you must do about it, that's how you are, is receive Jesus. Believe in him.

[36 : 17] Welcome him. Welcome him. Bring him into your heart. As God enables you to do so. Because except one be born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

You know, when you do enter the kingdom of God through rebirth, there's no exit door. You'll never have to leave it.

You're there for good. You're there for eternity. No one can take you out of it. No one can disqualify you from belonging to it.

Once you're in, you're in. Once you're in, nothing but glory awaits you forevermore. Let's pray.

Lord, we thank you for that rebirth that you bring about, through which we enter into your kingdom.

Lord, we thank you for the clarity with which you speak in your word and through your word, and for

the way that you do not leave us in doubt as to where the entrance to your kingdom lies.

[37 : 35] Lord, as we come to seek not only satisfaction and fulfillment for our own lives, but above all of that, as we seek to be acceptable and approved by you, help us, we pray tonight, to know that in this encounter we've had with you in the gospel, that you have indeed addressed our need, and that you have given us the ability, we pray, to come into your kingdom.

And as we are already in your kingdom, Lord, help us, we pray, to progress in it and to know you more and more. So receive us now, we pray, for Jesus' sake.

Amen. Well, our final psalm this evening, to God's praise, is Psalm 28. That's in the Scottish Psalter, Psalm 28.

And we're singing to the tune Arlington. That's on page 238. Verses 6 to 9. Forever blessed be the Lord, for graciously he heard the voice of my petitions and prayers did regard.

The Lord's my strength and shield, my heart upon him did rely, and I am helped. Hence my heart of joy exceedingly. From verse 6, Psalm 28, on page 238.

[38 : 50] God's praise. ringing entries. For van't. Forulk■ 28.

For everything else he ye, and I he the voice of my petitions, anytime I, but I have to know you now. I am heard by this creator, the voice of my petitions, The voice of my evolution, the voice of my evolution, and the earth did be guard.

The Lord's my strength and shield my heart, upon Him did we lie.

And I am helping to cast my heart, upon Him, and the earth did we lie.

And with my song I will embrace, there's strength, there's God alone.

[40 : 26] He also is the saving strength, He also is the saving strength, of His arroigned might.

O time for peace, but do I see, let's fight in every chance.

And also do the living and there, forevermore at last.

I'll go to the side door to my left this evening after the benediction. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and evermore. Amen.