

Don't Quench the Smoking Flax

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Victor over the people. This is the meaning of the name, Nicodemus. We are first introduced to Nicodemus in John 3 when he approaches Jesus during the night and affirms that the works of Jesus were from God. (3:2) He was a member of the Sanhedrin—the Jewish governing council composed of 72 men—a Pharisee, well educated, and one of the three richest men in Jerusalem. His position was one of power and there is little doubt that he was a man well respected by the people. Verse 10 alludes to him being "the teacher in Israel," so he was probably one of the prominent doctors of the law.

Nicodemus was clearly amazed with the miraculous works of Jesus. He knew *no one could do these signs...unless God is with him.* (3:2) Jesus immediately responds, *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.* (3:3) Earlier in his writing, John tells us Jesus knew all men and knew what was in them (2:24-25), so Jesus might have anticipated that Nicodemus would ask about the kingdom. Keep in mind, Nicodemus, a Pharisee who believed rigid obedience to the law guaranteed salvation, probably thought of himself as being welcomed into the kingdom with open arms. As a ruler, he would have special interest, since he could have been entitled to some official position in the new kingdom. There is little doubt that the words of Jesus caught him by surprise because he responds by saying, *"How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"* (3:4)

In verses 5-6 Jesus explains how one must enter the kingdom. Entrance into the kingdom will not take place without **being born again through water and the Spirit**. Here **water** is joined with the work of the Spirit. This thought is repeated in Titus 3:5 where Paul writes: *He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.* The new birth is still "amazing" to Nicodemus and Jesus repeats Himself in 3:7. As one person has written, "we may not understand all the mysteries of the new birth, but we can understand what has to be done and what is necessary. It is plain that a new spirit is essential to a new life." (B. W. Johnson) Even a man of Nicodemus' stature would have to start with all others by being born "anew" under the law of Christ. The Jew, ruler, Pharisee, and priest were on equal footing with all other men—having the need to be born again. Instead of merely finding out a few things about *another* teacher—Nicodemus is confronted with the Savior. His entire life was about to be turned upside down.

How does Nicodemus respond to Jesus' teaching? We're not told exactly. We next see Nicodemus in John 7:45-52 where he stands up to the blind rage of the Pharisees against Jesus by reminding the council of divine law on fairly hearing a case before assigning guilt or innocence. (Lev. 19:15) His comments must have angered the rest of them as they sarcastically respond to him in 7:52. Does he admit he is a follower of Jesus here? Not openly. But, at this time he still publicly withheld judgment on Jesus and His doctrines. He was not alone. Concerning this, John writes, *nevertheless, many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the*

Pharisees they were not confessing Him, for the fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God. (12:42-43) Would Joseph of Arimathaea and Gamaliel be in this group?

We last find Nicodemus after the death of Jesus. Out of his wealth, he purchased a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes and assisted Joseph of Arimathaea with the burial of Jesus. (19:39) It is here, finally, where he places his allegiance to Jesus clearly in the open. Nicodemus and Joseph were both members of the council and now go on record as being in sympathy with Jesus before His death. Just asking for the body of Jesus was no small feat. Usually the body was taken to a refuse area or left to decompose along the road (King). Perhaps Pilate gave up the body because he knew Jesus was innocent. Where were the 12? Isn't it ironic that Christ's crucifixion—which caused the faith of others to falter—only emboldened the faith of these men—who to this point had been fearful of publicly acknowledging Him? Their standing up at such a time of danger is something we should not lightly pass over.

In scripture, nothing further is known of Nicodemus. Tradition tells us that he gave evidence in favor of Christ at the trial before Pilate, that he was deprived of office and banished from Jerusalem by the hostile Jews, and that he was baptized by Peter and John. His remains were said to have been found in a common grave along with those of Gamaliel and Stephen. In other accounts, the family of a man named Nicodemus is said to have been reduced from great wealth to the most squalid and horrible poverty, which could have come about because of their acceptance of Christianity.

Some have called Nicodemus a "work in progress." How many of us are a "work in progress?" Here is a man who at first approached Jesus by night (he could not risk his reputation & position to be seen with a radical) but grew in his devotion to the point where he shamelessly declares his allegiance—risking everything for the Savior. Jesus' teaching ignited something within him—although slow at first—it grew into an unquenchable flame! As we go throughout John's gospel—Nicodemus' heart is in the midst of tremendous change. As we teach the gospel to the lost, let us be patient and let the power of the gospel work on the heart. May we never quench the smoking flax!

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