

Nic At Night • John 3:1–21

The Nickelodeon Television Network has an evening show that is a rerun of old movies and programs and it is called “Nic at Night.” Now there was another Nic at night who long ago came and had a conversation with Jesus Christ that became a major issue in the 1976 presidential election. It was then that Governor Jimmy Carter of Georgia made a statement to the nation and to the world saying that he was a born again Christian. There was a certain segment of society that delighted to hear that while others were dismayed that a presidential candidate, I think the first one in the 200 year history of the United States, had made such a declaration. The press scrambled to find out what this was all about, amazed to discover through the Gallup organization and others that at least 25 percent of the American population claimed to be born again Christians.

There are some people who think that the word “Christian” should never be modified, it should never have an adjective connected to it. For a Christian is a Christian — you’ve said it all; there is nothing more to say. Someone is either a Christian or not a Christian. But then there are others who feel that it has to be modified and will say, “He is a true Christian; he is a real Christian; or, those people are born again Christians.

It all started with a man named Nic who came to see Jesus at night. His name was Nicodemus and his story is recorded in John 3:1-21.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

“How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!”

Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no

one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven — the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives

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by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”

Nicodemus was educated, powerful and very religious. He had to be all three in order to be a member of the Sanhedrin which was a body of 70 men that functioned as the supreme court of ancient Judaism. He was a Pharisee, which meant that he

was one of the “separated ones.” Pharisees had thousands of rules and regulations that touched upon almost every detail of life. And the Pharisees were those who were committed to keep every one of the rules and kept themselves separate from those who weren’t committed to keep all the rules. I suppose we’d say in today’s terminology that Nicodemus was counted among those who were ultra-conservative, right-wing and were strict legalists.

Yet Nicodemus was also a humble, God-seeking and amazing man. When he came to Jesus, he called him “rabbi” which means teacher. Yet Jesus held no formal office as a rabbi or a teacher. Jesus didn’t have the formal education that Nicodemus had. Jesus was an ordinary man, a carpenter from the rural area of a distant province called Galilee. But that isn’t what counted to Nicodemus. What counted to Nicodemus was that in Jesus he saw God. He knew that God was there. He could hear it in the words Jesus said and the way he said them, and he could see it in the miracles — he knew that no one could ever do the miracles that Jesus did without the power of God in it.

I like Nicodemus. I like him and I want to be like him. I want to be the kind of person who isn’t all that impressed with titles and formal education, not all that deferential just because someone has some position or some office. I want to be the kind of person like Nicodemus who can see beyond all that and is a seeker for God and is attracted to Jesus Christ.

I know that some people have criticized Nicodemus. They have said that he was all that you have painted him in his portrait to be, then why did he go see Jesus at night? Was he ashamed of something? Was he afraid he would be caught or embarrassed? Why didn’t he go and talk to Jesus in the daylight and in public for everybody to see? There are others in his defense who say that Jesus, surrounded by the crowd in the daytime, wouldn’t have had time for the private conversation he shared late at night with Nicodemus. And Nicodemus was serious enough about Jesus and seeking enough for God that he wanted to have as much time as he could get in the privacy of a nighttime meeting.

What I find most interesting is that Jesus never

mentions it — he neither criticizes nor defends the nighttime meeting. Jesus doesn’t seem to care one way or the other when it is or where it is. What Jesus most cares about is that Nicodemus came. I like that. And that’s the way Jesus feels about us. If we just come, it isn’t the circumstances that count; it isn’t the time of day or the degree of darkness or light of the place; what is important is that we are humble God-seekers who come to Jesus Christ.

When Nicodemus came, Jesus wasted no time bringing up the issue. He said, “I tell you the truth, Nicodemus, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” And Nicodemus had no idea what he was talking about. It was not particularly connected with anything that had previously been said in conversation. What do you mean, you cannot see the kingdom of God unless born again?

Jesus had an interesting teaching style. It was sometimes upsetting, perhaps even abrasive. Jesus would often make starting statements that people didn’t understand.

Sometimes they were radical and upsetting. And then once he had a person’s attention, he would further explain until they could understand.

He knew where Nicodemus was coming from. He knew the man’s heart. And my guess is that Nicodemus had in his heart a question that we’ve all asked when we’re feeling depressed: “I wonder if I could start all over again? I wonder if I could just back up a few paces, erase everything that I’ve said and done, and begin again? I wonder if there is some way that I could just be born all over again? Is that possible? Is there some way to do that?”

Jesus, no doubt, had captured Nic’s attention and imagination, but when Jesus said you are never going to see the kingdom of God unless you are born again, Nicodemus was confused. How does this work? Is Jesus talking about some kind of “Honey, I Shrunk the Kids” where a person gets back inside his mother’s womb and is born all over again? What is this that he’s saying?

Jesus explains that there are two births: earth birth and heaven birth. Earth below and heaven above. Earth birth is the first one — it’s what we’ve all experienced — it’s the birthday we all celebrate once a year. But not everyone has experienced birth number two. That’s the heaven birth or the above

... *Jesus said to him, “Nicodemus, you must be born again.”*

birth. Jesus is saying that the second birth is more important — not because it is number two, but because it is a birth from God. It is a ticket to heaven. It happens in a supernatural way as if the Holy Spirit of God is the obstetrician that brings this transformation, this heaven birth, into a person's life.

Even after Jesus said it all, Nicodemus really struggled to understand. He was a smart man, an educated man, but he was having trouble with the theological theory of it all. Then Jesus said to him, "Nicodemus, you must be born again." And there was an instant switch from the highly theoretical to the personal. It is, I suppose, the difference between sitting in a university class room and hearing a lecture on heart transplants, from historical development to the latest technology, to sitting in a cardiologist's office having that person look you in the eye and say, "You must have a heart transplant if you are going to live." It becomes very personal at that point. In the movie, "The Doctor," a surgeon has one approach when he is the physician, but discovers a very different approach when he becomes the patient who faces the scalpel.

For Nicodemus, the theologian, the member of the Sanhedrin, the man with the education, it is a different matter when Jesus says, "Nicodemus, you personally must be born again."

It's the same thing with us. We can have our religious discussions and read the Bible and books and sermons and classes and all of that, but it's a different matter when one day we hear Jesus speaking our name, looking us in the eye, and saying, "You must be born again." Suddenly we switch from abstract theory to the very practical implementation and then we ask what Nicodemus asked, "How can this be?" Jesus answered with something of an insult, at least it sounds like an insult to me. He is recorded as saying, in John 3:10, "Nicodemus, you are Israel's teacher and you don't understand these things?" In other words, "Come on, Nicodemus, this is the most important spiritual issue that there is and your job is to teach people about spiritual things. You're supposed to be able to explain to them about God, and yet you don't understand the most important thing that can happen in a person's life, the only basis for a permanent rela-

tionship with God? Nicodemus, that's your job — you're supposed to know about this."

But Nicodemus didn't know. Jesus makes a very important point — that this is a matter of heaven and matters of heaven are not usually understood by those limited to the language of earth. Jesus explains that he and he alone knows both heaven and earth and speaks the language of both. Jesus and Jesus alone is bilingual in the words of God and the words of humanity. Nicodemus wouldn't get it even if Jesus were to explain it.

This summer I watched a television program about lightening striking people. It focused on individual stories of people who had been struck by lightning, deaths that had occurred from lightning strikes and showed some of the footage of what happened in Minnesota in 1991 at the U.S. Open when a person was killed by lightening. They interviewed people who had survived lightening strikes, had medical people explain the treatments that are given and had a meteorologist talking about the weather conditions and advice on what to do if you're caught out in a thunderstorm where there's lightning.

But what captured my attention most of all was the story of a man who years before had been in some type of an industrial accident and had his skull partially crushed. He survived but was severely disabled. He lost his eye sight, much of his hearing and his ability to walk, although through long term therapy, he had come to a place where he could walk with great difficulty using a cane. The doctors told him

there was really nothing more they could do for him and that he would live with these disabilities the rest of his life.

After years of living with his disabilities, one day he went outside during a thunderstorm and was struck by lightning, again! — after which he could see, had normal hearing and he was able to walk just fine without the aid of a cane. Now how do you explain that? I don't know — who does know? As one observer commented, it sure tells you there are a lot of things we don't know about the human body and how it works.

But somebody else who lacks sight or hearing

How does just looking at Jesus, believing in him, how does that transform someone's life for now and forever?

or the ability to normally walk might respond very differently by saying, “How do I get hit by lightning? How do I have that happen to me?”

Jesus knew that Nicodemus would never understand a full and detailed description of the new birth. He knew that Nicodemus needed to experience it, and so he put it in terms that Nicodemus would understand. He said, “Nicodemus, do you remember that time when the Hebrew people were sick and dying in the desert of an awful plague and there was nothing that could be done? God told Moses to put a pole in the ground and then to hang a brass snake on the pole and to spread the word for everybody to look up at the snake and when they did, they were healed? Do you remember that story, Nicodemus? Just like that, Jesus, the Son of Man, will also be put up on a stake, on a cross, and those who look up to him, those who believe in him, they will be saved from sin and death. They will enter the kingdom of God; they will be born from above.

But how does that work? How does just looking at Jesus, believing in him, how does that transform someone’s life for now and forever? How does that work? Jesus further explained:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. (John 3:16-18)

Nicodemus, do you understand that much? Do you understand that God loves us enough to send his son Jesus to make a new birth offer? Do you understand that if we believe, we are born again and not condemned? If we don’t believe, we’re stuck with the first birth and we’re condemned and condemned means hell.

Let me do what Jesus did and that is to personalize all of this. In Jesus words, you must be born again — because if you’re not, then you are limited to earth birth. If you’re not born again, then your sins aren’t forgiven, you’re not a citizen of heaven and you’ll never enter God’s kingdom.

So just do it. Just look to Jesus and believe. Believe Jesus died for your sins and ask him for the new birth. This couldn’t be more important. Talk to God. Tell Jesus that you want to be born again. Tell him that you believe in him to be your savior. Tell him that you pledge your allegiance to him and to his kingdom from this day forward.

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