

# The Cast|People Engaged in the Story of Jesus Christ

## *The Monitor*

John 3.1-21

February 4, 2018

*Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews;<sup>2</sup> this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*

*<sup>4</sup> Nicodemus \*said to Him, “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?”<sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup> That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’<sup>8</sup> The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*

*<sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to Him, “How can these things be?”<sup>10</sup> Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?<sup>11</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. <sup>12</sup> If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?<sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up;<sup>15</sup> so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.*

*<sup>16</sup> “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. <sup>18</sup> He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. <sup>19</sup> This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.” (John 2.23-3.21)*

We’re looking at the many characters in the Four Gospels who interact with Jesus Christ ... Today’s character appears three times and ONLY in the Gospel According to John...

In this first (and longest) appearance, we find one of the most famous verses in the entire Bible: John 3:16 and you’d THINK that this verse would be the main thrust of the sermon...but I’d like

to spend more time on the context of that verse and I'd like to zoom-in on this character, Nicodemus, who came by night.

This passage also contains a phrase that's been often misunderstood...often used as like code or insider lingo among some church-people and that is the phrase, "born again". So we hope to see what Jesus Christ actually meant by this phrase and we'll attempt to liberate it from its misuse in pop-culture or as churchy jargon. And IF we can see how the phrase is used here, if we can see how it's used in this amazing conversation, it could put the whole spiritual life in a new and wonderful LIGHT for you. So let's look at: 1) The Monitor 2) The Dialogue 3) Three Key Words

The passage begins: "There was a man of the Pharisees." And that links us to the previous passage where after Jesus cleanses the Temple and does "signs", the crowds started talking about making Jesus king (also 6.15) ...but He would NOT entrust Himself to the crowds (quote), "because He did not need any man to testify concerning Him, for He Himself knew what was in a man." And then the words, "there WAS A MAN of the Pharisees."

The writer, John, wants us to see that Jesus Christ can perceive the motives of men and THIS MAN is no exception – Jesus Christ can read what's in the heart of this MAN, the Pharisee, Nicodemus.

He's "a man of the Pharisees" They were the religious conservatives, the fundamentalists, forerunners of the Hassidic Jews, very serious about the Law, very knowledgeable of the Hebrew Bible and insistent that they were the keepers of the Tradition...they knew how to interpret the teachings of the rabbis.

We could add that while Jesus Christ didn't need approval from people (didn't need the testimony of men) but the Pharisees DID...I mean they really prized the recognition of their peers. They attached a LOT of importance to appearance/conformity and being noticed and accepted within their community.

AND, this "man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus" ("conqueror") was a "ruler of the Jews" i.e. he was a member of the Great Council, the Sanhedrin, so, a very important man, highly credentialed/respected.

Finally, we're told that Nicodemus came "by night".

Some say that it was just to elude the crowds who were ALWAYS around Jesus Christ by day. Maybe?

My guess is that Nicodemus came originally by night NOT just to avoid the crowds but to avoid notice of his fellow Pharisees. John makes note of it twice. Maybe Nicodemus was timid... his

name means conqueror but maybe he had a hard time living up to that big name – maybe he was a timid conqueror.

It does seem to fit the overall profile and there IS a connection in the final words of Jesus in this dialog when Jesus talks about men loving the darkness.

Remember, Nicodemus lived in an environment of spiritual/religious peer-pressure (12.42) where there was always the fear that a person may NOT be in step with the values/beliefs/practices of the group... and might be rejected or ostracized....secrecy thrives in those environments...people live in the dark.

Sadly, that's very common with religious groups and really with all groups. It may look like it's all about a common cause or all about God but soon it's all about acceptance with the group... a subtle shift takes place from the vertical to the horizontal.

And the timid man, living in this environment and afraid to be seen associating with this uncredentialed hillbilly spiritual leader and ready to address Him as "Rabbi" – well, Nicodemus had a lot to lose... so he's skulking around in the night... AND yet also, he's coming out of the darkness of peer pressure and secrecy and coming INTO the Light that Jesus Christ IS.

The next time he shows up (ch. 7) he's making a kind of defense as the Council is considering condemning Jesus and Nicodemus speaks up to say, "WAIT! Our Law doesn't condemn a man until he gets a trial!"

And the crowd turns on him; someone shouts out, "Hey Nicodemus, what? Are you from Galilee too?"

And then, a final appearance after the crucifixion of Jesus: Nicodemus shows up with 75 pounds of spice and fragrance to embalm the Body. Not only was that extremely expensive but it was also the amount that would be used for kings – so in the end, Nicodemus makes a big statement in support of Jesus.

Now notice as we move into the DIALOG (second point) that Nicodemus is sort of hiding behind his group: "Rabbi – WE know that You have come from God."

And Jesus Christ's reply almost says, "WE? Where's the WE... I only see YOU!... Truly! Truly, I say to YOU (that's the singular – there's no WE here just you!) I say to YOU (singular) – the timid conqueror – forget about being accepted by your WE...forget about speaking for the crowd... I say to YOU, unless one is born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God."

YOU...in your club...you THINK you know how God does things... you THINK you're the monitor who sets the bar and tests what's true and false about God and spiritual things... YOU'RE fixated

on public opinion and the testimony of the experts in your approval-seekers' club – BUT YOU, Nicodemus, YOU don't know how God does His work... YOU can't even see the Kingdom unless you are born again... born from above."

And Nicodemus doesn't really get it... but he sort of nervously plays along, "How can a man be BORN when he's old...he can't enter a second time into his mother's womb...CAN HE?"

Then Jesus explain this phrase "born again" and the Rabbi is always closing in on the man who came out of the night... "Truly, Truly unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God."

I take that to mean that being born of a woman is NOT enough... being born out of the waters of birth and born physically (from flesh) does NOT qualify you to enter under God's beautiful reign... YOU NEED A SPIRITUAL BIRTH... a second birth.

See, if you asked Nicodemus, "Sir, does God accept you?...Sir, if God asked you, 'Nicodemus, why should I allow you into My Presence...what qualifies you for heaven?'"

I'm pretty sure Nicodemus would said, "Well...I'm a Jew... I'm a descendant of Abraham... I'm one of the chosen people... MY MOTHER WAS JEWISH!"

"Oh so God accepts you because of how you were born...because of your Abrahamic DNA...?"

"Yeah!... I'm born from Jewish parents!"

And Jesus Christ is saying, "It's NOT the first birth that gets you accepted by God... IT'S A SECOND BIRTH... Your mother gave you life PHYSICALLY but only God, the Spirit, can give you life SPIRITUALLY."

Alright, one little clarification on this dialogue and then a few take-aways:

Whenever you try to decipher old literature you look for clues and one clue is "key words" – words and ideas that get repeated or stand out...and there are at least three such words here:

First, the word "born": it's used EIGHT times in vv. 3-8 and obviously it's THE key word. In the Greek language that John used it's the word "gennao" like our word "generate". It's always used in the passive voice and the focus is NEVER on something WE do but instead something that gets done TO US.

To tell someone that they have to generate a new birth for themselves misses the whole point... What did YOU do to get born physically? Nothing!

A second key word is the word “marvel”. Jesus tells this teacher of Israel, “DON’T marvel because THIS whole teaching is found in our Scriptures...the teachings YOU claim to know so well... Read the prophets and they’ll tell you again and again that an outward circumcision is NOT enough... there is another/inward birth... there’s a circumcision of the heart that GOD MUST PERFORM.”

“So...teacher of Israel... why act like you’ve never heard this...why marvel as if this is unknown.”

And yet... in another sense...THIS IS A MARVEL...it’s a mystery like the wind...we CAN’T point to where the wind begins or where it ends...we can only see the results. The wind isn’t something WE can generate... AND IN THE SPIRITUAL REALM, we can’t generate our spiritual life... it comes from above...God has to come down to us and work it IN us...and THAT (says Jesus) is what I’ve come to do!”

And then a third key-word: “believe.” It’s used seven times – obviously important! Somehow this whole dialogue is to compel Nicodemus to “believe.”

He came to Jesus firmly convinced that HE the mighty Pharisee could SEE (“We SEE that You are a teacher sent from God...”) and Jesus says, “You THINK you see...but you don’t...you THINK that seeing is believing...but I say BELIEVING IS SEEING!”

If you trust me...THAT is the certain sign that the Spirit has made you alive...and those who trust, who simply believe, they are the ones who see... those who believe start getting their questions answered and they who trust Me come from DARKNESS TO LIGHT...from blindness to sight.`

Now for some conclusions: #1) Things that claim our confidence. Nicodemus had been conditioned to have confidence in the esteem of his peers. “If people think highly of you then you must be a good person...a valuable...significant person!”

He was a Pharisee, an expert, a monitor, an inspector of all things spiritual. People looked at him and thought, “Man, that guy has it together! Most likely to succeed on the Day of Judgment!”

He had all the symbols of success and right-ness and his community affirmed him in every way. And he’s saying to God, “We think you could fit in well with our organization!”

And Jesus Christ says, “Quit foolin’ around (that’s what “Truly, Truly...” means!) Quit foolin’ around – you don’t even know what you’re saying! IT’S NOT ABOUT having the right lineage or having people affirm you – it’s about getting life from God!”

It’s so easy for religious groups/places of worship to become recognition factories...and back-slappers and approval seekers. It takes a supernatural act of God’s Spirit to convince timid approval seekers like ME... “It doesn’t matter what THEY think – it doesn’t even matter what I

think... IT ONLY MATTERS THAT YOU HAVE LIFE FROM GOD... Therefore, put your confidence in Him who came to bring life from heaven to earth...trust in the Only Begotten Son.”

Last, Jesus Christ came into the world to raise the dead. Every person you’ve ever known (including YOU yourself) is in bad shape... we can count on that.

God told our first parents, “In the day you turn from Me and go out on your own – YOU SHALL SURELY DIE...” We need NOT to try harder...not better education... not better habits or better abs (although all those things might be nice)... but what we really need is LIFE from God... to be made spiritually alive and responsive to God.

Jesus Christ is like the serpent lifted up in the wilderness with Moses (Num 21) – He came down from heaven (v13) in order to be lifted up on a Cross to bear our bad record, to be the symbol of my sin, to be lifted up and put on display as the Scapegoat.

For Nicodemus... it didn’t happen in one big bang... but life was welling up in him and he was ceasing to be the know-it-all monitor... He was stepping out of the secrecy and the pretending and into the Light.

And in the end, he was, I believe, changed. He does deeds that are not complying with peer pressure... but were manifested as having been wrought in God... not a conformist but a hero.