

MEETING JESUS: NICODEMUS

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
John 3:1-17

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TEXT: John 3:9-10 “Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?’”

PURPOSE: To encourage a meeting between us and Jesus through experiencing Nicodemus’ meeting with Jesus.

Hello, I’m Nicodemus. You know, the man you just heard about in the story from the Gospel of John. I know, I look a lot like your minister, but bear with me for a few minutes. Actually, ministers in your day aren’t all that different from Pharisees in the days of Jesus. We’re both respected religious leaders.

I hate to say it, but John was pretty accurate in his description of my meeting with Jesus. I did go to see him at night. I didn’t want my colleagues to know that I was attracted to the guy. I didn’t get his play on words – he used a word that could mean either born *again* or born *from above*, and I was so nervous about being with him that I actually thought he was advocating some outrageous kind of physical rebirth.

And the further he went into his explanation, the duller my mind became, until about all I was doing was scratching my head and wondering what in the world he was talking about. Born this way and then that way. Wind blowing this way and then that way. Or was it some Spirit that was blowing? And then he said he was only speaking about earthly things, and knew I was too thick to grasp any talk of heavenly things!

Don’t get me wrong. It’s not like I have no experience with religious discussions. We Pharisees are all about religious discussions. We talk about the ways of God the way that some of you talk about baseball: this ERA, that batting average, this guy traded there, that guy denying he used drugs. We pore over the traditions of our elders the way some of you pore over your crossword puzzles. What’s a five letter word for God’s plan for our lives? *Torah*. Who’s responsible if I loaned you my ox and it hurt someone while it was in your custody? We are forever involved in religious discussions.

So why did this meeting with Jesus put my brain into a cramp? For one

thing, Jesus didn't play by our Pharisaic rules. I started off by complimenting him: 'We know you are a teacher come from God.' The correct response would have been for him to thank me, and to say something about his work not being all that special. But instead, he seemed to totally change the subject, and told me that no one could see God's kingdom without being born again or from above. It threw me for a loop. I didn't come to him looking for the kingdom of God. I came hoping to build some rapport between him and us, us being the official religious experts of those days. We never got around to my subject.

Or did we? My meeting with Jesus made a huge impact on me. I left unsatisfied, but I couldn't get what he said out of my mind. I couldn't get *him* out of my mind. I didn't dare tell any other Pharisees that I'd been to see him, let alone that I continued to feel this strong attraction to him, even though talking with him had been so frustrating. One thing he said kept banging around my head like the words to a song you wish you could forget, but you can't. "God so loved the world," he said, "that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life." What was that about? God giving his Son, and people believing in his Son not dying, if that's what not perishing means.

It turned out that there were a few other Pharisees who had been favorably impressed by Jesus. We sort of figured out how to recognize each other. After he became ridiculously controversial all through Galilee and Judea, any gathering of religious experts inevitably included a conversation about Jesus. It seemed like my colleagues were trying to outdo each other in a contest of vilifying Jesus. Mostly, no one liked the fact that he had no interest in authorization from us. But we also didn't like the kind of people he spent time with—the riffraff, people we thought had no ability to grasp the intricacies of God's ways. We were afraid that he'd stir up trouble and provoke Rome, with whom we had negotiated an arrangement that definitely was good for elite Jews. And, we didn't like how popular he was. We were respected, you know, but we weren't particularly liked by the general public. We thought we didn't care what the general public thought about us, until we saw what it was like for a religious teacher to be downright adored.

Anyway, there were a few of us who tried hard not to look too

uncomfortable whenever these ‘badmouth Jesus’ sessions came around. When it was safe, we’d seek each other out, and gently probe to find out if there were other sympathizers. There were. One was Joseph of Arimathea, quite a wealthy fellow. He and I tuned in to the news about Jesus. We went to see him whenever we could—never up close, mind you—and talked privately about what he was teaching and who he might be.

Like all observant Jews, Joseph and I were in Jerusalem for that momentous Passover. Not only the Pharisees, but the priests were in an uproar about Jesus after so many people had seen him bring that Lazarus fellow back from death. We all got together and decided that it was best to get rid of him. No one knew exactly how, but no one wanted to negotiate with him anymore. At least, no one who had the nerve to speak against the high priest. Joseph and I still wonder what would have happened if the sympathizers, like him and me, had taken a stand back then. But we didn’t, and in all too short of a time, the disposing of Jesus went off without a hitch. We religious professionals got rid of a threat to our precious status quo, and, we got to blame it all on the Romans, since Pilate was the one who gave the order to crucify him. It made me sick. I was ashamed to be a Pharisee. The whole thing followed the letter of the law, but it certainly perverted the spirit of what God expected of us.

I stood there, looking at him hanging on the cross, and suddenly it all made sense to me— what he had said to me that night that I first met him: “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” And there he was, lifted up! “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son . . .” There he was, being given! And there I was, believing! It was a terrifying and wonderful moment for me.

While I deep in my reflections, Joseph roused me with a proposal. “Don’t you think that the least we could do would be to give him a decent burial?” At first, I was shocked. Just the thought of handling that body, as messed up as it was, made my stomach turn. Not to mention the fact that everyone would see us taking care of him, which would be like shouting our support for him. We had refused to take that risk when he was alive—what fool would want to declare his allegiance to an executed traitor? But then, I thought: our teachings say that the

best good deed is a kindness shown to the dead. And also, I thought: is it possible for me to go back to the Pharisee club, to sit in a room with all of them congratulating themselves on the success of this little project of theirs? The thought of that made me sicker than the thought of taking his body down from the cross. I went and got the supplies for the burial—spices and a shroud—while Joseph sought Pilate’s permission to tend to the body. (John 19:39) It was coming close to dusk by the time we got to the cross. All three of the men who had been crucified were dead, and most everyone had left, except for a few women who clearly were associated with Jesus. They were a bit intimidated by us at first, but when they realized the purpose of our coming, they bowed respectfully and pitched in to help. Good thing. Neither Joseph nor I knew how to get a body ready to be buried.

Anyway, putting Jesus in that tomb was the holiest thing I’ve ever done. And it put an end to my old life. Oh, I was still a Pharisee, but I was unquestionably expelled from the Pharisee club. Not that I cared, even then, when I thought Jesus was dead and done for.

I can’t begin to tell you what it was like to hear the news that Jesus had been raised from the dead. I never saw him, but I did go back to see the tomb, and it definitely was empty. So that was the beginning of a whole new life for me. I am one of the Jesus people now. The rest of them know who I was, but it makes no difference in the fellowship who anyone was before we met Jesus. For sure, whenever the community has a question about the scripture, they will say, almost as a joke, “Ask Nicodemus! He knows all there is to know about the scripture!” Truth is, I have a totally different understanding of the texts now that I am a believer. God told Father Abraham that it would be through his family that all the families of the world would be blessed. (Genesis 12:3) Well, Jesus, son of Abraham, is the way that blessing is happening. God spoke of the servant as one who was pierced for our faults, crushed for our sins, through whose wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:4-5) I could never understand what that passage meant. But now that I have been healed by the wounds I inflicted on Jesus, I know exactly who God’s servant is, and how his wounds can heal others.

So today, in your presence, I am taking all my Pharisaic learning, and I am nailing it to the cross of Christ. (Colossians 2:14) I am crucifying the idea that I could be some sort of religious expert. And I am rejoicing that I am nothing apart

for the love God still has for the world, which includes me and certainly includes you, love so huge that it gave Jesus so that everyone one of us might live the life God wants us to live, the life Jesus liked to call 'eternal.'

I have none of the prestige and pretensions I had in my old life, but I have the memory of my meeting with Jesus, and I have the experience of his awesome forgiveness, and I have the blessing of life in the community of his followers who continue to share his life in this world. I have everything I need to live the life God wants us all to live.