

## High and Lifted Up – Nicodemus Part 1

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### John 3:1 – 21 (NIV)

Jn 3:1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council.

Jn 3:2 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.”

Jn 3:3 In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

Jn 3:4 “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!”

Jn 3:5 Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.

Jn 3:6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.

Jn 3:7 You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’

Jn 3:8 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.”

Jn 3:9 “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

Jn 3:10 “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things?

Jn 3:11 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.

Jn 3:12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?

Jn 3:13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.

Jn 3:14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,

Jn 3:15 that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

Jn 3:16 “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.

Jn 3:17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Jn 3:18 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.

Jn 3:19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.

Jn 3:20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.

Jn 3:21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”

The title of this message is “High and Lifted Up”.

Like so many of God's ways, this very phrase gives us insight into God's brilliance.

If you've had the experience of knowing any really, really smart people – I think you'll agree

with the assessment that one of the marks of an intelligent person is depth: depth of learned skill, depth of natural talent, depth of understanding, even depth of humor. Intelligent people are rarely one dimensional in any meaningful area.

So it is with God in an infinite way.

I love the way God thinks and works. Everything He does is multifaceted. This phrase, "High and Lifted Up".. it at once has connotations of exaltation and glorification, but at the same time it also means condemnation and judgment. And in fact, the exaltation and glory that it shows, is only obtained through that condemnation and judgment. And of course, that truth is a hallmark of God's economy: the high will be made low, and the low will be made high.

These are ideas and methods we would never think of on our own. We view success and glory as the end results of some mammoth struggle against overwhelming odds. But in God's economy, success and glory can be the results of obedience unto a miserable, lowly, completely humiliating death.

He uses the most unlikely solutions to problems. He doesn't always battle fire with fire, and He doesn't always battle fire with water.

Here's what I mean:

As far as we know, God has had no stronger opponent than Satan. Satan was and is God's highest created being – second only to God in power, authority, and intelligence. And this immensely powerful being made the decision to attempt to overthrow God.

So faced with this insurrection, how did God battle His opponent? Did He simply overpower him? Or did He simply out think him? The answer to both of these is yes, but not in the manner we expect. See, God did indeed do these things, but He did them by giving Satan what he wanted... He allowed Satan a victory. How odd is that? That isn't what we would do... we would seek to deny our opponent what he wants.. but not God.

See, Satan desired to rebel against God..... and God allowed the rebellion. Satan desired to be God Himself, and God allowed the attempt. Satan desired to kill God, and in a sense Satan got what he wanted.

Some of you listening, most actually, desire to rebel against God... you wish to go your own way... you don't wish for God to rule over you. What do you think God will do? God will allow your rebellion... but don't ever make the mistake of thinking you're right with God because there doesn't seem to be friction between you and Him.

Some of you want to be God yourself. How is that? You want to judge for yourself what is true, rather than accepting God's word as final. Some do this with the question of lying, or theft.... others do it with the definition of marriage or with the issue of abortion. What do you think God will do? He'll allow you to play at being God.

Some of you also want to kill God, because if God died – so would His truth. And if His truth died, you could make your own truth and you could do whatever you wanted to do. What do you think God will do? He'll let you play make-believe that He is dead, but not only that...if

you persist in sin He will even reinforce your own mistaken notions in your own mind so that you cannot believe the truth. God will give you what you want.

On the cross God allowed Satan to commit the ultimate acts of corruption and destruction. On the cross, God allowed Satan to slaughter an innocent man – the preeminent man. And on the cross, God allowed Satan to kill God – God the Son. God gave him what he wanted. In pride and selfishness - Satan coveted, and in love, and mercy, and selflessness - God gave. Satan's pride and selfishness were targeted at God, but God's love, mercy, and selflessness was targeted at us.

In His providence, God used Satan's evil nature and desires to accomplish the very thing God desired to do: to satisfy His own wrath against our sin by pouring it out upon His Son rather than on us, so that all that believe in His Son for their salvation, will be saved.

God gave Satan all of the sin and all of the death, and all of the destruction it was possible to give. He gave Satan all of it. From every where, from every when, from every one.. God took all of that death deserving sin and He placed it upon His Son, and then Jesus laid down His life as a sin offering for all of us. Satan wasn't aware of all of this, all of the ramifications of what was happening. He merely saw a chance to slay, destroy, and feed – and he jumped at that chance – and through evil men he slew Christ as Christ allowed His life to be taken from Him.

In the story of the cross, God didn't win by meeting Satan in battle in the manner Satan expected to be met... God won by allowing Satan to have a victory. And it was a real victory – the only problem for Satan was the fact that Satan's victory was even more so God's victory – because that victory carried out God's desire.

And whereas Satan could only benefit from his victory in that one place and one time, God benefited from His victory across all time and all space. And that aspect of God's victory was Satan's ultimate defeat.

When Jesus Christ was first “High and Lifted Up”, Satan was once and finally brought down low to eternal defeat.

In this battle, God's army was an army of One – His only begotten Son. The trumpet cry of battle was the cry of a little baby from the depths of a manger, and a final cry of victory from the throat of a dying man on a cross. And the evidence of victory wasn't the immediate disappearance of all of God's enemies, but instead it was His Son, raised to life – glorified – made to live again, never to die again.

God doesn't do things at all like us. His ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are not our thoughts. As the heavens are higher than the earth, is He higher than us.

When receiving God's revelation – when considering it - expect the unexpected, assume the “unassumable”. Be prepared to cast yourself on the impossible.

If you don't respond to God's revelation in this manner, I can promise you from God's word that you will miss it. His ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are not our thoughts. If you

insist on understanding everything to a T with what you have between your own ears, you will perish. God's salvation is based upon faith, trust with legs on it, not upon full understanding. God doesn't want us to disengage our brains when accepting His words about Himself, but He does want us to realize that we are mentally unable to comprehend all of it. How does a person with a very finite mind, fully and completely understand an infinite God?

Because of this, God has made it about trust, not about full understanding.

<sup>1Co 1:18</sup> For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

<sup>1Co 1:19</sup> For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

<sup>1Co 1:20</sup> Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

<sup>1Co 1:21</sup> For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.

<sup>1Co 1:22</sup> Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom,

<sup>1Co 1:23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,

<sup>1Co 1:24</sup> but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

<sup>1Co 1:25</sup> For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

<sup>1Co 1:26</sup> Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.

<sup>1Co 1:27</sup> But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

<sup>1Co 1:28</sup> He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are,

<sup>1Co 1:29</sup> so that no one may boast before him.

If you approach God's revelation in pride and selfishness, like Satan, God will give you what you want. He'll give you an endless ladder up which you must climb to seek to save yourself – and in that manner He will allow you to seek to satisfy your pride and self-centeredness. He'll give you the right to choose your own destiny. He'll give you the right to attempt to manifest your own righteousness. If you insist on standing on your own two feet in relation to pleasing God, you will reap a destiny that is capped by the limitations of your own abilities. And that means - you will reap a destiny without God.

But if you approach God's revelation in powerless humility, you'll reap the storehouse of heaven. And God will give you what you want – eternal forgiveness in Himself.

What I want to do with this message is look at two different elements of one passage of scripture. The passage is John 3: 1-21. This passage contains the very well known verse of John 3:16. But as is often the case John 3:16 is commonly lifted out of its context and presented as some type of stand alone truth. It isn't.

This passage was presented by Jesus to a man named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, who came to Jesus by night to question Him about His person and His teachings. In answering Nicodemus, Jesus leads him back to two great historical accounts chronicled in the Old Testament that looked forward in time to Jesus' arrival.

Jesus uses these two things to seek to answer Nicodemus' questions and to reveal the truth about Himself.

So I want to look at these two things that precede the wonderful verse of John 3:16 and that set the stage for the truth it proclaims. The first concerns an account out of the book of Daniel the prophet about a mysterious figure called the Son of Man, and the second is an account from the Exodus of Israel out of Egypt that concerns some very strange instructions to Moses from God Himself.

But before we begin, I want us to take a look at Nicodemus. In order to understand why Christ told him what He did, we need to know a bit more about Nicodemus himself.

So let's start with John 3, verses 1&2:

Jn 3:1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council.

Jn 3:2 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."

Take a look at poor Nicodemus here... right out of the bucket we learn some really important things about him:

1. He was a Pharisee
2. He was a member of the Sanhedrin
3. He was impacted by God's revelation in Jesus, but he was confused about Jesus, primarily because of his background.
4. He was open to learn more about Jesus
5. He was open to the truth.

**He was a Pharisee** – a defender of the law (both God given and man extended) against the forces of Hellenism. The Pharisees originated in the inter-testamental period around the mid 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. They were an offshoot of a former group called the Hasidim (meaning "the pious ones").

The Hasidim originated in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC when the Syrians had conquered Judea and were trying to force the Jews to give up their adherence to the Torah in favor of Greek culture. During this time in Israel's history there were really three main groups: the Oniads, their leaders were sort of an elite, high priestly class. They were concerned with being orthodox, but would compromise with invading powers if necessary. And of course there was a group of commoners that looked to them.

Then you had the Tobiads. They were sort of a secular group who were unashamedly secular, so much so that they were practically evangelists for Hellenization - the spreading of

Greek culture throughout the known world.. Not only did they work with the foreign Hellenization powers, they welcomed them in with open arms and actually betrayed their fellow Israelites to them when it was convenient to do so. And you had a group of commoners that looked to them.

And then you had the Hasidim – their name means “the pious ones”. They were made up of regular priests, synagogue leaders, and commoners who simply wanted with all of their hearts to be true to God's word and worship Him according to the law and the prophets of their Bible – our Old Testament.

The Hasidim knew that the defeat and dispersion afflicted upon Israel by Babylon had come by God's hand. They knew God had punished them for Israel's former rebellion and disobedience, and the last thing they wanted was to go through that again, so they sought to serve the Lord properly. And they paid for that conviction dearly.

At one point in the Intertestamental period, Syria had their fill of Israel rebelling against their rule, so they said enough is enough.

1. Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) outlawed circumcision.
2. He outlawed sabbath observance.
3. He outlawed the festivals of the Lord.
4. He ordered that all copies of the Torah be destroyed.
5. And he decreed that the flesh of pigs must not only be eaten by the Jewish populace, but that it must also be sacrificed on the altar of the Lord. In fact, he set up altars to Zeus on the main altar at the Hebrew temple and all throughout the country.

In short, he was out to destroy the Jewish religion.

Well, the Hasidim – with clear and calm conviction simply said “no”. They would not disobey God in favor of obeying any man. So mothers still had their children circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of their life, they still gathered together on the sabbath, and they refused to eat or sacrifice pork. The Syrian response was brutal.

History records that groups of Jews would go into the Judean hillsides to celebrate the Sabbath in caves. And when they were discovered by the Syrian troops, they were annihilated down to every man, woman, and child. The Syrians would barricade them inside of their caves and then put the barricade to the torch. They simply cooked the Hasidim where they were. This scenario was carried out again and again throughout the land.

History records a group of mothers who were caught in the act of having their sons circumcised. So the Syrians, right in front of their mothers, ran the 8 day old babies through with the sword and put them to death. They then tied the dead, bloody bodies of these babies around their mother's neck with a cord, and then paraded the mothers through the streets of Jerusalem as a cautionary tale to the other people. Once the procession reached its end, the women were slaughtered in the street.

But the Hasidim remained loyal to the Lord. The more the Syrians enforced their decrees, the more and more people joined the Hasidim. The people had had enough. And in fact it was these atrocities of the Syrians that led to the Maccabean revolt of 168 BC.

It was out of these people that the Pharisees grew sometime around 145 BC.

So what's my point with this little historical aside... my point is that as Christians we have been powdered and primed to pull the trigger of distaste at even the merest mention of a Pharisee and sometimes even anyone who would show respect for God's law. We ought not be that way. It is a grave sin to be that way.

The law is Holy, Righteous, and Good. It doesn't matter that the law can't save us: that it can only condemn us. That isn't the law's fault – the law was never meant to save us. The fault in this equation is with us: the flaw of sin found deep within us that makes us incapable of adhering to God's law. There isn't a problem with the law, there's a problem with us.

But as Christians, we know we are saved by God's grace. Anyone who is saved, must be saved by repentance and faith in Christ – only God's gift of grace in His Son. Not grace plus anything, most especially our own efforts at following God's law. But here is where we have sinned. We have taken the very good thing that God has given us in His law, and we have used it as a barricade, a point of contention between us and our Jewish friends. When in fact we should be using the law as a bridge to reach out to them. We should do what Jesus did, and as we'll see in a minute, this is exactly how He used the law and the prophets.

But quickly, what else do we know about Nicodemus here.

**He was a member of the Sanhedrin.** Although the specific requirements for one to be a member of the Sanhedrin in the time of Christ are a bit murky historically, most likely Nicodemus was a man of mature age, a man of some means, and a man well versed in the Jewish law. We know a bit more than this though. In v 10, in the greek anyway, the definite article “the” is used in the question “are you Israel's teacher...”. The greek reads, “are you the teacher of Israel”. It isn't made clear exactly what position Nicodemus held, but we can certainly say it appears he was an important man possessed of some measure of authority and stature in Israel.

**Nicodemus was impacted by God's revelation in Jesus.** The thing was, he just didn't know what to make of it. At least in this matter of Christ, Nicodemus was an honest man. And he could not reconcile his personal theology with the fact of Jesus Christ.

See, over time the theology of the Pharisees had shifted from their ancestors the Hasidim. They observed God's law, but they only truly honored one part of it. And the part of it that they honored, they embellished with the ideas of men. And they did this for so long, with such zeal, that eventually they held the laws and regulations of their own creation in the same honor and esteem that they did God's laws. And they did this for so long and with such zeal, that they believed their own laws and regulations were God's laws. That's fatal. It's absolutely fatal. It always is.