

High and Lifted Up – Nicodemus Part 2

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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.

Because of their shifting theology, there were gaps in their understanding. And into these gaps, like holes in a wall, they thrust in the straw, mud, and plaster of their own making in an effort to make their understanding whole.

Now while the Pharisees sought to honor the law, they did not honor the concepts of true repentance and true sacrifice. The repentance and sacrifice in which they engaged was not of God. They were more concerned with what they could do to “please” men, and to “please” God, than what God could do to please Himself in their regard.

This is also rampant in the church today. On the one hand we have wave after wave of teachers pushing “easy believism”. A theology that says that one must simply “trust” in Christ to be saved. But the “trust” of which these teachers speak, is not the trust of which God speaks in the Bible. It's the same word, but with radically different meanings. It is not the trust of which Jesus taught in this passage.

When God says we must trust in His Redeemer, His Son, to be saved, He means a no holds barred, pedal to the metal, complete and utter total casting of ourselves upon Christ. We are to totally and completely turn from our old selves and we are to turn to Him, hold to Him, adhere to Him, rely on Him. In fact, we are to crawl inside of Him. And when we do that, God tells us, He changes us from what we were into something new: a new creature. We undergo a metamorphosis by being placed into Christ that cannot happen in any other way. Easy Believism seeks to gain the benefits of a relationship with Christ, and thus a right standing with the Father, but at the same time to hold Christ and His demands for discipleship at arms length.

And on the other hand, we have groups within the church that teach that we must observe certain rituals or certain commandments to attain or retain our salvation. This idea could not be further from the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Well, poor Nicodemus. He was confused, but he was open to learn more about Jesus. No doubt he had first heard something **about** Jesus. And what he had heard impelled him to see and hear for himself. So he probably mingled with the crowd and listened to and

observed Jesus. We don't know this for a fact, but it would seem likely for a person like Nicodemus. A scholar, a learned man, most usually checks things out for himself before he allows himself to come to a particular decision.

Now at this time, Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Passover, and He was teaching and backing up His message with the authority of God Himself by the miracles and signs He produced.

And if Nicodemus did in fact go to listen to Jesus, he would have witnessed Christ's teaching as well as these miraculous signs and wonders that demonstrated quite clearly that Christ was acting with the very authority of God Himself. All of this left a mark on old Nicodemus – how could it not? But it was a mark and a testimony that clashed with his personal theology. So he determined to seek out and speak with Jesus himself, in a one on one personal encounter to get to the bottom of what he had seen and heard.

And lastly, Nicodemus was open to the truth about Jesus and about what He was teaching.

When Nicodemus came to Christ, he came at night – secretly. He knew what his fellow leaders thought about Jesus, but he wanted to make up his own mind – and so he set out to do so. When Nicodemus came to Christ, he came first wielding all of the truth he knew, and then allowed Christ to fill in the rest:

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.”

Now it seems like Jesus replied with a non-sequitur – an off topic, alien response, but in reality, Jesus simply sought to advance Nicodemus to the next logical step.

Jesus knew God was with Him, and He knew Nicodemus knew it too. There was absolutely no reason in staying with just that idea and engaging in idle chit-chat about what they both recognized. What Jesus did, was to take Nicodemus to the next logical step – and he did it through what was already running around in Nicodemus' mind.

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.”

You see, the Jews were eagerly awaiting the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God had been prophesied as a time when Israel would be delivered from that which blinded, crippled, oppressed and killed them. The Kingdom would be ushered in by the coming of the Messiah. The Son of David, who was also somehow David's Lord, who would conquer all of Israel's foes.

The Jews were living under the hobnailed boot of Rome, and they had been for a very long time. Before that, they had lived under the oppression of the remains of Alexander the Great's empire. Before that, they lived as a vassal state under the Medo-Persian empire, and before that – reaching back almost five centuries, they had lived as exiles from Israel in the land of the Babylonians.

To say that they were waiting and ready for God to establish His Kingdom and do away with

their enemies was an immense understatement. But there was a danger. The Jews had raised the ability to revolt against their various overlords to an art form. And for that, they had been slaughtered left and right throughout the centuries. Rome, bit by bit, had tightened their control over Israel. After the death of Herod the Great in 4BC, they had begun to establish direct Roman rule over Judea, and they were always on the lookout for the next insurrection – to nip it in the bud before it could spread.

The Jews were waiting for the real Messiah to step forward and be recognized, and Nicodemus was there with Jesus to see if in fact Jesus was the man.

One of the main problems though, is that the Jews believed that their problems were physical. Many of you believe that your biggest problems are physical. You don't have enough money. You don't have a car, or a nice enough car. You don't have security, or enough security. You don't have health, or good enough health. The Jews felt that it was currently Rome, and previously all of the other empires that had blinded, crippled, oppressed and killed them. They were wrong. Some of you are wrong too.

For sure, the Jews had been maltreated and slaughtered by more than one empire, though not all. They were not an independent nation... they were now a Roman backwater, a frontier province on the edge of one of the greatest deserts known to man.

But no matter their situation, their main problems were not physical. They were spiritual. They were indeed blinded, but it was sin that had covered their eyes – not man. They were crippled, that was true. But it wasn't the crippling taxes of Rome that was the problem, it was the debilitating effects of sin that crippled and oppressed them. And yes, that killed them.

God's Redeemer, His Messiah, came to provide spiritual deliverance so that those that accepted Him could have eternal life. The Jews believed they were spiritually fit... of all the people on the Earth the Jews believed they alone were spiritually fit. And they were quite literally dead wrong. Jesus came bearing spiritual deliverance. He still does. The Jews, and most people now, are looking for a physical deliverance. Don't be one of them and miss out on what God is offering in Jesus Christ.

Well, it was to this misunderstanding that Jesus directs His next comments.

In his reply, Jesus in essence said this: “okay Nicodemus, you have heard me, you have seen me, you have acknowledged that my authority and my power are from the one and only God...

Now let me bring you a message from God. The Kingdom for which you are waiting, let me tell you something about that. It's my Kingdom actually, and I set the entrance requirements. If you want to see that Kingdom, Nicodemus, you must be born again. You have been born once, that's true. But you must be twice born – born again by God's Holy Spirit, if you wish to partake of the Kingdom of promise.”

And of course, this literally blew Nicodemus' mind. Just like it does ours the first time we hear this. Like Nicodemus we have to ask, how can a man be born again?

Nicodemus is listening to Christ, but his thinking and expectations are bound up in the

physical world, not the spiritual. So Nicodemus asks the obvious question with an equally expected amount of incredulity:

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!”

Okay. First: eeewwwww.

Second – Jesus clarifies, He hones in on the true meaning of what He is trying to convey:

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.’

So here is the crux of the matter... Jesus is saying, “Look Nicodemus. Entrance into the Kingdom of God requires a two-fold birth. First you must exist. Then you must re-exist. First you must be born, then you must be re-born. You cannot participate in the Kingdom of God, unless you participate in the Spirit of God. And the manner of participation that God has established, is one akin unto birth. Just as your parents gave birth to you, a new creature - So must the Holy Spirit give birth to a new you.

Jesus continues and explains the working of the Spirit in this regard of the new birth, and in this 8th verse of John 3 we have one of the most confusing, misunderstood verses in the entire New Testament.

Jesus says:

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.”

In verse 9, Nicodemus replies, and if I may paraphrase: “Huh!?!”

I feel sorry for Nicodemus because for all eternity here is this poor man, this very learned man who wanted to learn more about Jesus – who from the human perspective is a completely untrained man as far as the things of God are concerned. Jesus hadn't attended the right rabbinic schools, in fact, He hadn't attended any Rabbinic schools. And in just a few short sentences He has not only completely taken over the conversation from Nicodemus, He has dropped several high precision truth and logic bombs that have left Nicodemus sputtering in confusion.

A lot of Christian commentators don't seem to like Nicodemus much, perhaps because of the Pharisee thing. I don't know, but I love Nicodemus. When I read this I feel sorry for him, but the whole while I'm also rooting for him! I just wish I could sneak up by his side and whisper into his mind... Hey, let go the walls your upbringing has built around you. Separate what God has said from what others have said, and listen to Jesus from that state. Free up your mind to accept the unexpected, and to accept the impossible. Because with God, all things are possible.

When I first read this passage, I was right there with Nicodemus: “Huh!?!” Maybe some of

you are in the same spot. So let me give you a few of the most prevalent interpretations for verse 8, and then I'll tell you what I think it means, and then we'll move on.

First off, as with any passage, it's important not to remove it from its historical context... so in this case, we're talking about 1st century, iron age Judea. **Long** before the sciences of meteorology, fluid dynamics – modern physics.

That said, some say that verse 8 simply points to the mystery of conversion. Like the wind, we can see its effects, its reality, but other than that we're mostly clueless about how the Holy Spirit does what He does. Now, that idea certainly isn't wrong, it's exactly right. But I think this verse means this plus some other things.

Others say that, just like the natural wind seems to blow where it pleases, so the Holy Spirit comes and goes as He pleases - converting who He wants to and leaving other people unconverted and damned for all eternity.

Now there is great truth here too. Certainly the Holy Spirit can do as He pleases. He is God. Certainly it is true that without the ministry of the Holy Spirit (conviction in regards to sin, righteousness, and judgment), no one can be saved. But to take those facts and then say that God condemns some to Hell when He could have saved them by merely deciding to... I can't go there, because I don't see where God's word goes there. That doesn't describe the God that has revealed Himself to me in His word and in the changes He made, and is making, in my heart.

If we were left with this verse, or just verses like this, it might be possible to come to such a conclusion, but fortunately we aren't left with just these. God has revealed to us His desire, and He has revealed to us what the Holy Spirit wants and works to accomplish:

Please consider these verses, when wondering what God wants, what the Holy Spirit wants, and how they go about carrying out their will:

God was appalled at the fallen condition of man, so He determined to do something about it Himself.

Isa 59:16 He saw that there was no one, He was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so His own arm worked salvation for Him, and His own righteousness sustained Him.

God did what was necessary to open a way back to Himself, by sending Himself in God the Son as a substitutionary atonement for our sins. He gave Himself for us. He took our sins upon Himself and paid their price.

Isa 53:4 Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.

Isa 53:5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Isa 53:6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Who's sins were placed upon Christ? Some but not others? Setting aside for the moment that in God's view of sin there are no "good" people, maybe just the "bad" people's sin?

No, everyone's sins were laid on Christ. In our very passage in this message:

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.**

If you somehow are not of this world, or you can factually say that the word "whoever" does not apply to you, then perhaps Christ did not die for you. Otherwise, He most certainly did.

Jn 3:36 **Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."**

But is this just talking about Christians, or those God knows will become Christians? No.

1Ti 4:9 This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance

1Ti 4:10 (and for this we labor and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe.

1Ti 4:11 Command and teach these things.

1Jn 2:2 He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. (holos kosmos – the entire world system)

Col 1:15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

Col 1:16 For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.

Col 1:17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Col 1:18 And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

Col 1:19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,

Col 1:20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

God cannot make it more plain, I think.

How does God call people to Christ for salvation? How does He draw them?

Jn 6:44 **"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.**

Jn 6:45 **It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from Him comes to me.**

How do we listen to the Father, to God? By listening to what He has said, AND what He is saying. And what is that? Two things, His word – which is the Bible I hope you're holding in your hands, and two – His Spirit – that testifies between your ears and under your sternum, to the truth of God's word.

Everyone who truly listens to what God says, everyone who trusts in what God says and allows God to put them on the path outlined in scripture, - every one of them, will end up right at the feet of Jesus at the base of the cross. God, in His word, has built a pathway with no other exits than at Jesus Christ. One can hop off early, that's true. But one cannot hop off early and remain in God's will. All scripture leads to Christ. That's the meaning of John 6:45, and that is how God draws **all** people to His son.

Jn 6:45 **It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me.**

What role does the Holy Spirit play in this call?

Jn 16:5 **"Now I am going to him who sent me, yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?'**

Jn 16:6 **Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief.**

Jn 16:7 **But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.**

Jn 16:8 **When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment:**

Jn 16:9 **in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me;**

Jn 16:10 **in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer;**

Jn 16:11 **and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.**

The Holy Spirit provides an inside-out testimony to every man, woman, and child to the truth of God's word, when they hear God's word. And He does this in three ways: First, He convicts the world of guilt in regard to sin. He does this by pointing to God's law, and He does this by pointing inside of us at the things we know are broken within us. No one of us can say we are sinless in light of the Holy Spirit's conviction.

Two, He convicts the world in regards to righteousness. He does this in that showing that Jesus has it, and we don't. Jesus is the embodiment of the ten commandments. He is the living tapestry that tells that story, and He is the only person about which that can be said. When we compare ourselves to Christ, which the Holy Spirit bids us to do, we are shown to come up far, far short of what God requires of us.

Third, He convicts the world in regards to judgment. Because God is holy, righteousness, and good – He will judge and destroy those things that are not. That is how He protects that which is holy, righteous, and good, and keeps it from ceasing to be. In light of the Holy Spirit's conviction, we know we are not holy, righteous, or good.. thus God's fiery judgment upon us is a done deal, it just hasn't happened yet in the course of time. But it's coming.

And in light of these three things, the Holy Spirit then holds up Christ. The atoning sacrifice for our sins, but not just ours, but the sins of the whole world. But like any gift, it must be accepted. God has made the application of Christ's sacrifice optional and conditional. He has made a very simple requirement to make use of this great gift, and it's called faith. Faith is nothing more than active trust, complete reliance upon Christ to save us from our sins.

And the Holy Spirit does all of this inside of us, pointing to the truth of scripture the whole time.

Who does God call? God's redeemer, His savior – Jesus Christ, God also made man said this:

Mt 22:2 “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son.

Mt 22:3 He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.

Mt 22:4 “Then he sent some more servants and said, ‘Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.’

Mt 22:5 “But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business.

Mt 22:6 The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them.

Mt 22:7 The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

Mt 22:8 “Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come.

Mt 22:9 Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’

Mt 22:10 So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

Mt 22:11 “But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes.

Mt 22:12 ‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ The man was speechless.

Mt 22:13 “Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Mt 22:14 “For many are invited, but few are chosen.”

Isn't it clear – God calls everyone. This parable is about Israel, but it's also about all of us too. God invites (greek Kletos – meaning to call or invite) everyone. The problem is that not everyone responds in the manner that God says we must. In the parable, not everyone accepts the King's invitation. In life, not everyone accepts God's provision in Christ via faith. They don't exercise the faith that God has granted them. God never asks anything of us, including saving faith, that He is not willing to grant us.