

John 3:1-21; 7:37-52; 19:38-42

## JESUS & NICODEMUS

It will be hard to tell this story in the daylight. It needs to be dark and mysterious, with shadows flickering from the light of the burning lamp. When daylight comes, we look around us and our eyes focus on many objects, and we mistake the things we see for what is real. It is easy then to forget the deeper, stranger forces of life – the meanings and feelings and motives that flow beneath the surface, calling us here and there for good or ill. At night, as the objects fade into shadow and one is alone and the earth is still, that is the time to search life's deeper secrets. That is the time to search one's self, and also a time for finding truth in another.

My story begins on such a night. A lamp flickering on the table. The night so quiet without, and me, sitting in slow and ponderous conversation with a man only half my age. Yet His wisdom was such that I – a master of debate and expert in matters of the Law and religion – could barely comprehend what He was saying.

At first He lost me completely. I thought for a moment that I had come upon one of those poor souls whose minds conjure up visions and oracles without meaning or reality. But even as I was wondering, He realized He had lost me. Immediately, almost with a sigh of disappointment, He began slowly and patiently to explain things as clearly as He could. It still was not easy. His simplicity was so deep, it was almost frightening.

But I forget – this would not seem strange to you who do not know me. My reputation was once so great that I keep forgetting to introduce myself. My name is Nicodemus.

Ah, but that does not introduce us, I see. You must forgive an old man his vanities, and allow me to tell you who I was.

A man of the Pharisees, I was. A member of the picked elite of our nation. We were the ones who bore the burdens and took the responsibility in those difficult and treacherous times. We were the defenders of our faith, the ones who kept hope alive when it seemed that all the world would surrender to pagan Rome and all she stood for. I myself had come from one of the great families. We were members of the Jewish aristocracy.

My very name means “victorious among his people.” From earliest childhood, I had been taught to cherish my heritage, to love my nation, to bring honor to my family, to obey Torah.

I had more than fulfilled my parents’ expectations. I became a ruler of the Jews – a member of the Council, the highest position in our land, with the possible exception of the High Priest. Yes, I was a member of the Sanhedrin. Seventy men were set over the great affairs of our nation, and I was one of them. I had the prestige and power of a Supreme Court Justice and a Senator rolled into one. I was wealthy and respected. I was old and shrewd and cautious – a veteran of debates and political intrigues beyond number. There was no Jew in Palestine who did not know my name.

I, Nicodemus – venerable and righteous – in a mood of compassion, went to do this young man a favor. I went to talk some sense into Him before He got Himself into trouble so serious He could never get out. I was cautious enough to go at night, naturally. It would not do to have the people see a member of the Sanhedrin visiting this young upstart troublemaker. The Council was already angry enough to throw Him into prison. They always got really nervous when somebody started stirring up the people. There was no telling where such things might end, especially with the Roman soldiers breathing down our necks. It did not take much in those days to get into a real bloodbath. The Romans did not care what it was about, and they could not tell the difference between a revolt and an in-group quarrel. At the sign of any disturbance, they just marched in and started killing until everybody ran for cover.

This Jesus had become more difficult than most. He came out of nowhere – literally nowhere – no family, no sponsors, no formal education. He just up and decided one day that He knew more about life than anybody else. So off He went, tramping around the countryside, stirring things up, raising questions, causing trouble – telling everybody who would listen His own version of some new truth.

Life was really hard for us under Roman domination. The people had to have some outlet. Jesus kept telling them that this life was not really what it seemed – that God had real hope and real blessings for people right in the middle of their harsh circumstances. There did not seem to be any real harm in that, and for a while we thought He might do some good. But it turned out there was a lot more to His Message than simple spiritual platitudes.

Then just before Passover, which is our most important national and religious celebration, He went way overboard. He walked into the temple in broad daylight and started taking the whole treasury apart. I was not there, but they said it was so shocking that nobody could think what to do. The guards just stood there with their mouths hanging open while all the money-changers ran for cover to escape the bite of His whip. It must have been quite a sight. If it had not been so serious, it would have been humorous.

By the time the Council met, the priests were so angry that I thought we were going to have a stoning party right there and then. He had accused them of cheating the people, and that made them doubly angry because, in actual fact, they had been. One could not keep from admiring His courage, and be a bit delighted to have somebody finally tell off those money-grubbing priests. But of course, the Council could not just stand by and let any self-appointed Messiah come along and take over the temple.

There was no telling where it would end, at this point, but I thought perhaps I could talk to Him for a while and get Him to see that such open threats to the authorities could only bring disaster to all concerned. It was with such thoughts in my mind that I went out into the night those many years ago – and found myself talking to the strangest man I have ever met.

One of His friends opened the door and, seeing I was alone, let me in, though not without suspicion. Apparently they had some awareness of the danger they were in. That would help, I thought to myself. I thought everything was stacked in my favor. As you know, young men are usually suckers for any compliment, especially those that reveal genuine admiration from a superior. He would feel honored by a visit from a member of the Sanhedrin. I would compliment Him on His work, and express genuine admiration for His teachings and His gift for healing people, and soon we would be discussing His ministry. I felt sure I would then be able to persuade Him toward a more reasonable approach. And I would prove to my colleagues once again that more could be accomplished by friendly concern and understanding than by means of threats and anger.

It is hard to retell our conversation. There was far more to it than the words we spoke. His understanding seemed to cut behind my words and make long explanations unnecessary. He wasted little time with the

usual pleasantries. He seemed tired, but calm and relaxed. Looking back, I realize we both misjudged each other. Because I was an expert in the Scriptures, He expected more wisdom from me. And because He was an uneducated peasant, I expected a simple, untrained mind that was no match for my subtle shrewdness.

I opened the conversation with my well-planned compliment: “Rabbi” – the very title would carry a recognition He would not expect, coming from me – “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one could do these signs that you do, unless God was with him.”

He looked at me quietly and let my words bounce, hollow-sounding, around the room. A wisp of a smile crossed His face – not mocking, but merely acknowledging my art. Then He looked at me and said, “*The truth is, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*”

I felt like someone had poured a bucket of very cold water down my back. Somehow, with His manner and those words, He had connected with long-forgotten hopes and dreams. I remembered how I had longed since childhood to be a man close to God – a man like the ancient prophets who spoke with God and did God’s bidding, and feared no one. But time and circumstance had conspired against me to rob me of my early idealism. Long since, I had concluded that people no longer reached such heights or walked with God so closely. I had settled for more realistic, practical goals. I had worked hard and gained honor among the people. I still thought of myself as a man on God’s side, essentially, but it was my duty to work with the machinery of the world I found myself in. I had come to believe that it was the innocence of youth that thought it could walk with God personally. Yet all at once, it was as if my *soul* had come back to life, and I could hear it calling to me.

With some effort, I shrugged it off and tried to regain my composure. “Oh come now,” I said to Him, “you cannot expect to teach an old dog new tricks. *Can a man be born over again when he is old?*”

His eyes seemed to know my story as well as I knew it myself. “*The wind blows where it wills,*” He said finally. “*You cannot tell when or how God’s Spirit will come. It is not too late for you.*”

We spoke of it for quite some time. I cannot remember it all clearly; my mind was whirling so. I understood that His purpose was to lead people to just exactly this kind of spiritual rebirth – what I had once desperately wanted but no longer believed to be possible, at least not for me.

He recalled to me that time when our ancestors in the wilderness were beset by hoards of poisonous snakes, and how Moses had set a bronze serpent on a pole so that, by God's power, any person who was bitten could look at the bronze serpent and save his life. Jesus claimed a kind of comparison – saying that He too would be lifted on a pole so that those bitten by the spiritual death of this world could look to Him and save their souls.

I could not dissuade Him from His brashness. Each time I tried, He showed me the implications of my compromises, and how it would betray His purpose. Even as I argued, my irrefutable logic withered and shriveled into the excuses and rationalizations of an old man trying to play it safe – and defending a system that no longer served the truth for which it was created in the first place.

In the days that followed, I tried to forget the things He had made clear to me – especially the emotions that went with them. Perhaps I could have sloughed it off in time, but the anger of the Council grew. At last, they convinced themselves that this man must be crushed before He upset our whole government, or led us into civil war, or brought the full might of Rome down around our heads.

It was not foolish prattle. If He had not been stopped, He would have changed our nation's way of life – not perhaps in the ways they imagined, but just as radically. From our encounter, I knew this to be true more surely than they did. Yet I kept wondering if maybe this was exactly what needed to happen. I began to realize that I felt a strange loyalty to Him. Perhaps it was because He had believed that there was more to me than I dared to believe myself. I even tried to defend Him. Not outright, of course; I could not afford that in my position. But I tried to appeal to the due process and procedure of the Law.

My colleagues laughed me to scorn. “Stop trying to throw roadblocks, Senator,” they chided. “Surely you don't think this rabble-rouser from Podunk should be left loose to take over the country! You're starting to sound like a Podunkian yourself, Senator. Surely you cannot mean for us to take your remarks seriously.”

What could I say? I was a minority of one. Why risk my whole career and reputation on a lost cause for one man? Heavens! I had only spoken to Him once, and He had not really appreciated even that.

You know the rest of the story. It was a nightmare for me. I held my peace, but I kept hearing His words and remembering the hope they had awakened in my heart. I had seen a lot in my time, but what happened next was different – somehow more personal. At the time, it seemed like there was really nothing I could do. But what I wouldn't give to live those days over again! I would have called forth so many legal snags, they would still be trying to untie the knots. But not then – I was too frightened.

The only good thing that happened was Joseph of Arimathea. He was a member of the Sanhedrin too. We discovered, finally, that we felt somewhat the same way about this man. At the time, we never thought of using our influence together, but it was some comfort to have each other to talk to after the meetings. We even became friends. As a matter of fact, Joseph became the first real friend I had had in many a year.

The rest is even harder. I was there that day ... I saw Him on that cross. He did not belong there. It is strange how silly little thoughts hit you at a time like that. The phrase kept running through my mind, over and over: "He does not belong there." It was me and all my kind that put Him there – all the pompous, stuff-shirted, scared, greedy little half-men put Him there. But He did *not* belong there.

Then suddenly I remembered His words about the bronze serpent and the pole – and the escape from spiritual death. Something started to come loose inside me. He had known all along what was coming, how it would end, what it would cost Him. So why hadn't He quit, turned aside, gone somewhere else? I could not understand. It did not make any sense. To end like that – and for what?

My mind was trying to think, trying to retrace things, trying to be sane and logical, but my emotions were going crazy inside me. There were no more words ... except I found myself loving Him – loving Him for what He was and what He was doing, and because He would not cheat with truth or quit on life, no matter what it cost Him.

Then something twisted inside me, and all at once I did not care anymore. I saw Him die, and I did not care anymore. They could take their temple and their priests in fine robes, they could take their big titles and all their words about honor and righteousness, they could take their Sanhedrin and their high-sounding words about justice and the good of the people – and they could go jump! Yes, and they could keep their veiled threats, their expediency, and their traditions that left out mercy and love. "They" were me, and I was "they," but they could have

it all and keep it, because I did not care anymore – not about this world or any of the life I had known within it. Something else was more important: HE was! Somehow I had come to love Him – Him and the strange, mysterious truth He had stood for, and died for.

We buried Him – Joseph and I. Two crotchety old men were all He had left, or so I thought at the time. I brought enough spices to bury the whole Sanhedrin. It would not help Him now, but it was my guilt offering. In silence we wrapped His body and buried it in Joseph's tomb.

For a while I thought my mind would snap. Guess I hoped it would. But my sorrow and shame were too deep and real for that. He was dead because we had all stood back and watched and kept our mouths shut. I kept learning more and more about the things He had done for people. Some incredible man! And now He was gone – murdered by our fear and cowardice.

Then I was alone again in the night, with only my thoughts – dark and heavy. It was Passover, but I could not go to the temple. I was unclean from the burial. It did not matter anyway.

Then there flashed into my mind that wisp of a smile on a young man's face, and the thought circled back again more slowly: "It did not matter anyway?"

My grief stayed with me but there was something else with it now. "How can this be?" my mind kept asking. "How can it be that Passover and your appearance at the temple no longer matter?" Only then did I realize what I had done. I had buried the hated one and cut myself out of Passover. The Council would be livid and I did not care – had not even noticed. I had risked everything I had spent my whole life to build, and without giving it a backwards glance. For the first time since childhood, I had acted the way a man dreams of acting: not by precepts from outside – not by the expectations of the system or the pressures of other people – but from a soul within that knows and feels and loves.

I, cautious old Nicodemus – the shrewd protector of his own reputation and position – had been changed. He had been right! The wind had blown for me at last. That was only the beginning for me, of course. But that is what my story is about: the wind of God ... and a bronze serpent ... and the Christ who called me back to love and LIFE.