

## Title: “The Rabbi from God”

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John 3:2

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**Service Readings:** Gen 12:1-9; Romans 4:1-8, 13-17; John 3:1-17

*Nicodemus sought out Jesus, but on his own terms. Do we do this same thing in our own lives?*

### Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Poor Nicodemus. He was in the midst of a midlife crisis and calling out for help. His whole life had been one of devotion to God. He was an influential Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, a seventy-member Jewish Council that was in charge of the Jewish affairs in that area and also responsible for ensuring that God's people adhered to the Laws of Moses. He had spent his life fearing God and earning His favor through obedience and works. Like any devote Jew, and especially any who had devoted his life to this type of service, he enjoyed a confidence that God would look with favor on him and bless him in this life and the one to come. The foundation of his faith was built on the laws and traditions of his forefathers and they seemed so solid he couldn't imagine ever finding a single crack.

And yet, when Jesus entered the scene, that is exactly what he discovered. Not only did a crack appear but that crack threatened to shatter everything that he had built his life upon. It could be possible that his foundation may not have been rock but sand, and it was this concern that drove him to seek out Jesus that night. Did he go in the cover of darkness because he didn't want to be noticed by other council members? Maybe. But other Jewish leaders publicly confronted Jesus during the day so it was probably something else, maybe even something more personal that caused him to wait until he could speak to Jesus alone. For during the night the crowds would be gone and he would have the teacher's undivided attention. And for someone who may be experiencing a crisis of faith, this would have been critical to him. He had to determine the substance of his foundation; was the laws of Moses solid rock or were they just sand?

And so he approaches Jesus and says to him:

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”

Now, consider for a moment what lies behind this statement. First, Nicodemus calls him Rabbi, a Jewish teacher. And then he confirms that Jesus must have come from God because of the signs he is able to perform. You see, in just this one sentence Nicodemus has constructed a plan to repair his foundation of faith and ensure that it remains solid. He does this by trying to force Jesus into a reality that he and God's people have constructed over a thousand years. They believed that the savior would come as a Jew and would uphold Moses' Laws and the Jewish traditions. And that he would realize victory for God's people and free them from the clutches of their oppressors. This is how they understood the Abrahamic covenant. And they held to this belief so strongly that they

never even questioned if their interpretations were wrong. And so Nicodemus asks Jesus if he is that person. Is *he* the Jewish savior? Is he the promised one from the line of David?

And then Jesus responds:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.

It is as if he informs Nicodemus that the foundation on which his faith is built is not sand, nor solid rock, but has always been only a *shadow* of the *real rock*. And that real rock is standing in front of him – living and breathing. It is a rock not built from the stone of the commandments or any other law, but is built from Jesus, himself – the fulfiller of those very laws. At this point Nicodemus is desperately trying to protect the security of his foundation but is finding it increasingly impossible to do so because God is not conforming to his expectations. Instead, he is demanding that Nicodemus conform to his. And this turns Nicodemus’ world upside down. For how can access to God be from something outside his control instead of from works? Jesus doesn’t tell him to work harder or obey more perfectly, but says that he must be born again. It’s as if Jesus is revealing to him that he is dead with all his works and actions, that his position as a Sanhedrin doesn’t help, either.

Luther once illustrated this point by describing a child which is to be born two years into the future. At present the child of this mother is nothing and can do nothing. This is common sense. And in like way so all works, however grand and precious they may be are absolutely nothing if performed before regeneration. And the only way through which one is regenerated, born again, is through Jesus. And just as the unborn, unconceived child has no power or control over his own birth, neither does man. It is the work of the Holy Spirit who calls a person to these waters of Baptism where he is joined in the death of Jesus and also joined in his resurrection.

This troubles Nicodemus, obviously, for every belief he has held firm has been shaken loose and the very foundation of his faith is in jeopardy. What does he do?

This passage doesn’t describe his reaction but we can infer from other passages that Nicodemus takes this teaching to heart. It is quite possible that this is the moment that the Holy Spirit entered and ignited the first spark of real faith within him. For after this interaction there were two more recorded by John. The first happens a few months before Jesus is arrested, Nicodemus seems to defend him before the Pharisees. They want to arrest Jesus but he warns them not to. He says:

<sup>51</sup>“Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?”

Clearly he has not dismissed Jesus or his teachings outright. The Spirit is actively working on him. And then, after Jesus is crucified, he contributes 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes for his burial. The Holy Spirit is clearly still at work. How does it end for Nicodemus? Does he convert? Does he get baptized? Scripture doesn’t tell us. But that’s okay because we don’t need to know. Maybe it is better if we don’t know for we can use his life and struggle as a model for our own lives.

How often has the foundation of your faith been shaken? You may be baptized already, and you already consider yourself a follower of Jesus, but that doesn’t protect you from times like Nicodemus experienced. We have all had times in our lives where our situation, or a situation from someone we love, causes us to question our faith. Maybe you wonder if you can *really trust* God’s

wisdom as you see the pain and suffering of another Christian's life. How can God allow *that* to happen to such a devoted member of his family? You don't want to inspect your foundation for fear that maybe, just maybe there is a crack in it. Or even worse, you find it crumbling.

In these moments of personal crisis we can mimic Nicodemus and come to Jesus. We can meet him in prayer and we can meet him at his table. And we can come to him with our own presuppositions and he will listen to us. And he will respond to us just like he responded to Nicodemus. He will say to us: "Truly, truly I say to you, you have been born of water and the spirit. This is not by your doing but by mine. I have been lifted up so that you will have eternal life."

And you may walk away like Nicodemus did, not fully satisfied, not at peace. But you walk away with the words of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit still within you. You may not walk away with a solid confidence in your faith but that is not the goal. For if you believe that the goal is to have unquestionable faith, you have made the same mistake that Nicodemus made in trying to meet Jesus on your own terms instead of his. Instead, the goal is to rely on him for *everything* in your life and to return to him daily where he can remind you of your baptism and the life that you were given through him. And where he can renew and refresh your faith with his body and his blood. That is the goal – to always and forever return to him. Meet him in prayer; meet him in Scripture; meet him at his table. But above all else, meet him. Meet him and let the Holy Spirit continue his work in your heart strengthening your faith and keeping you ever close to the one who gives you life.

Please pray with me.

<sup>16</sup>“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Lord, we cling to this promise and ask that you continue to send the Holy Spirit to us in order that our faith may stand through the challenges of this life, until we live with you face to face.

Amen.