

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night

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Isaiah 6:1-8, Psalm 29, Romans 8:12-17, [John 3:1-17](#)

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. I want you to think for a moment about what that means. This very gospel tells us that Jesus was **“The true light, which enlightens everyone.”** (John 1:9) It tells us that Jesus is **“The light that shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overtake it.”** (John 1:5) But Nicodemus came to Jesus by night.

This gospel says that a woman, a despised Samaritan, came to Jesus as he sat by a well at the very moment when the sun was at the zenith of the sky. It was the hottest part of the day to be sure, a time when others hide in their homes. But she was not afraid of the light and in the illumination of that day, she could see that Jesus was a prophet and messiah. But Nicodemus came to Jesus by night.

Jesus himself said that he was the light of the world and proved it by giving a blind man sight. He taught that, **“Those who walk during the day do not stumble because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble because the light is not in them.”** (John 11:9-10) And yet Nicodemus came to him by night!

A Respected Man

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a man who was greatly respected by all for his commitment to the law. He sat on councils and spoke in meetings where he was honoured and people were always willing to hear his opinions and judgements. He counted powerful people like Joseph of Arimathea among his friends – Joseph who went in and out even among Roman governors and who could put his hands on large sums of money to bury a friend on short notice.

Everywhere he went, Nicodemus could count on a warm welcome and friendly conversation. He was always given an honoured place whenever he was invited to dinner.

People Assumed the Best

If ever he happened to be caught in what looked like some compromising position, people always gave him the benefit of the doubt. Not everyone can count on that. When something is missing, for example, there are certain people who are always suspected because of their race, their status or their living situation. They might be accused despite there being no evidence at all.

Some people live with the constant expectation of such accusations, but Nicodemus never had to worry about such things. On the contrary, people always assumed the best of him even when he gave them no particular reason to do so. He was a man whose days brought him nothing but honour and respect, and yet Nicodemus came to Jesus by night.



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Sincerity

Nicodemus knew that Jesus was a teacher who had come from God. He had no doubts about that because he had seen and considered the things that Jesus had done and recognized that they were powerful acts that could only be accomplished when God is with somebody. When he said that to Jesus, he said it with utter sincerity. And yet, knowing all of that, Nicodemus came to Jesus by night.

There is something wrong with this picture, isn't there? When you are somebody who has a privileged position in society, you will act openly and carry out your deeds in the full light of day. When you truly believe that somebody has come from God and that the goals that they pursue are good ones, will you not say so openly? What is the point of believing something if you will not say it at times and places where people will hear it? If you are a person who loves the light, why are you skulking around in the darkness of the night?

Criticism of Dr. King

But here is the truth. Nicodemus is not alone. In fact, there have been many others like him who have come to Jesus by night. In 1963, when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested and imprisoned in the Birmingham City Jail for disobeying an injunction that banned public protests against racial policy, a group of eight prominent white Christian leaders made a statement.

They said that Dr. King's goals of racial equality were good, that it was the right thing to do to build a more just society. They might as well have said, **"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God,** for you teach a way of justice." But there was one problem. They came to Jesus by night.

They called the actions of King *"unwise and untimely."* They thought that he was acting in a manner that was too open and confrontational. His demands for justice and change were being made in the full light of day. They felt that the only way to effect the change that was needed was to work without disturbing things, without shaking things up. They wanted to come by night so that no one would see and maybe no one would even notice the change.

Letter From Birmingham Jail

Martin Luther King's Jr's response is justly famous. When he read about the statement of the white leaders, he began writing a response immediately on the newspaper clipping. He continued on scraps of paper passed to him by one of the black trustees working in the jail and finally finished it using legal pads supplied by his lawyers. It was finally published as "The Letter from Birmingham Jail," a great work of American literature.

There is one passage in the letter that I know that I must return to regularly to challenge myself. *"I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate,"* King writes. He might as well be saying, "I am disappointed in those who come by night."

"I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion" he continues in the language of the time, *"that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is*

the presence of justice; who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action.'"

Need More than Good Intentions

I think that that was what Nicodemus was doing with Jesus. He was trying to say, "I agree with you in the goal you seek," but I am not willing to risk my standing or my reputation by using them to support what you are doing. I'm going to come, but I'm going to come by night.

And Jesus understood all of that. Just as Martin Luther King Jr recognized that the eight leaders were men of goodwill who were speaking with all sincerity, Jesus understood that Nicodemus had good intentions and wanted to do the right thing, but the fact that he had come by night told Jesus that Nicodemus desperately needed more than good intentions.

What Nicodemus Needed

Jesus cut him off immediately and told him this: **"Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."** Nicodemus was puzzled. He had come, he thought, to discuss the finer points of creating justice in this world without having to risk himself by showing his intentions in the light of day, and Jesus seemed to have suddenly changed the subject. He blinked and declared that what Jesus had just said seemed nonsensical: **"Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?'"**

But Jesus hadn't changed the subject. What he had just said made perfect sense. It didn't matter if Nicodemus agreed with Jesus' goals. It didn't even matter if he believed all the right things about Jesus. None of that was obviously going to persuade Nicodemus to give up on what had convinced him that he could just come by night. Nicodemus needed to be born again.

Double Meaning

For centuries people have wondered what Jesus might have meant by that demand that he made of Nicodemus. Even Nicodemus was puzzled over the phrase. It doesn't help that the Greek phrase that Jesus uses in the Gospel has a double meaning. It can mean both "born again," and "born from above." And that quickly becomes a reason for misunderstanding between Nicodemus and Jesus.

But what he was saying – and what Nicodemus failed to understand – was that Nicodemus didn't need just another birth to a life that was oriented towards the values of this world. Had he gone back into his mother's womb to be born again, as he suggested, it would have only been to be born once again to the world of privilege and honour given to him by his first birth. He needed to be born anew from a new place, from above and with the very different attitudes and priorities of heaven.

"Born Again"

As you probably know, that phrase that Jesus used with Nicodemus, that demand that he be born again or born from above, has since taken on a life of its own. People have pulled that one

phrase out of the context of this story and used it as a definition of their kind of Christianity. “I am a ‘born again Christian,’” they will say.

They are saying that their faith began with the kind of experience that Jesus told Nicodemus he needed to have. And that is all fine and good, assuming that you understand what it was that Jesus was saying to Nicodemus.

Sometimes when people say that what they mean is that they have had a powerful experience of the presence of Jesus. Maybe they were at a particularly low time in their life, regretting some things that they had done perhaps, and they experienced the presence of Jesus in a way that brought them the healing and forgiveness that they needed most at that moment. Others might experience the presence of Jesus in a public worship context where, among the people of God who are praising, they find themselves transported into the presence of Jesus.

Not Just an Experience

Such experiences are truly wonderful. If you have had such an experience in your life, you are indeed blessed. I would never question the validity of someone’s experience of Jesus. But let me ask you this. If you encountered Jesus, but you came to him by night, did you really have the “born from above” experience that Jesus was talking about? I mean, Nicodemus encountered Jesus. He was right there in front of him talking to him. And yet Jesus told him that he was still in need of that second birth.

What I mean is that, if you are blessed to have such a wonderful experience of Jesus, and it doesn’t transform your priorities, it doesn’t make you willing to stick your neck out like Jesus did for what is right and just, Jesus might still be looking for more from you.

Jesus’ Acceptance

Let me be clear about one thing, however. Jesus was glad that Nicodemus came to him whenever he came. In the same way, Jesus is extraordinarily glad that you came to him as well. Later on in this passage, as we read this morning, we have one of the most powerful statements of God’s love and acceptance in the entire Bible: **“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”**

On whatever terms Nicodemus was willing believe in Jesus, whatever trust he was willing to place, even if he came by night, Jesus accepted that. In the same way, Jesus accepts whatever trust you are able to place in him as well.

But for your sake, he would rather that you not come by night but in the fullness of the day. He would have you be born from above so that you do not value the fleeting things of this earth – things like wealth or status – over the priorities of heaven. Jesus wishes this for you and for Nicodemus because he wants you to be a part of his great work in this world – work that is done in the day.

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, but you don’t have to. And if we can all remember that, we are on our way to carry out the works of the day and change this world for the better.