

## Hush-Hush (John 3:3-17)

When Jesus says no can see the kingdom of God without being “born from above,” it’s an invitation to unlearn old answers, to relinquish all that we assume makes us acceptable in this world, and to surrender our need to be in the driver’s seat.

Nicodemus scoffs at the proposition. “How can a man be born when he is old?” he asks. I don’t think Nicodemus is being a literalist. I think he understands what Jesus means. What he’s telling Jesus is, “I’ve worked so hard to get where I am, to believe what I believe, and I’m just too old now to turn around and start all over again.” That’s when Jesus utters the most-often quoted verse in all of scripture: “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.”

Perhaps you’ve been taught that “perish” refers to hell, “eternal life” refers to heaven, and “believing in Jesus

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will determine whether you will perish in hell or receive eternal life in heaven. But it's more likely that Jesus, as he looks at Nicodemus standing before him in the darkness, sees someone who is already perishing and desperately longing for life—right now.

When we are working so hard to have all the answers and keep up appearances and play the part, it can be exhausting to the point of perishing. What is vital and eternal inside us begins to die. Jesus offers us an alternative to “perishing.” He calls it being “born from above.” It's akin, he says, to becoming like a toddler all over again and being led by the hand by a God who moves freely through this world like the wind blowing through the trees. It is eternal life that we can access right here, right now. Have you ever wanted to go somewhere but been a little afraid of who might see you arriving or departing? Maybe you would like to hear a speaker

on a topic of interest you would rather keep secret, or listen to a

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band or see a play or go to a movie that you fear might reveal something about you. Perhaps you live in an area where local team loyalties are strong; you still root for your hometown team but you would never put out a yard sign or wear a jersey around the neighborhood.

Sometimes we keep our loyalties, our interests, and our questions hush-hush.

Nicodemus makes three appearances in John, to go along with the three occasions Jesus visits Jerusalem in this Gospel. The first visit follows a story most of us associate with Holy Week. Jesus upends the tables in the temple, crying out against its use as a marketplace. It's important to note that in John's Gospel, unlike the other three, this happens early in Jesus' ministry rather than in the days before his arrest and crucifixion. It is the

opening round of Jesus' conflict with those in authority.

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No wonder Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. He did so because he was a member of the Jewish ruling council. This means he was a senator or a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the Jews. He was a Pharisee and Israel's teacher. In other words, he held some official position of the highest rank. He was either the *leading official* or the *leading teacher* of Israel who was either authorized or accepted as such by the public.

He apparently was wealthy because he spent a great deal of money on the burial of Jesus. He was silent at the trial of Jesus, saying nothing to defend Jesus, but he boldly stepped forward after the Lord's death to publicly help in the burial of Jesus.

He came to Jesus in behalf of the religionists. He said, "We know" (v, 2). Some of the religionists

wondered if Jesus was the true Messiah, thinking that perhaps he was. Some eventually became believers. Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah and performing the

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spectacular works that were prophesied of the Messiah; therefore, he was the talk of everyone throughout the nation. The rulers were questioning and wondering: Is he really the Messiah? This was the question, the thing that Nicodemus felt compelled to find out. Note, again, that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. He apparently did so because he *feared* the other leaders who opposed Jesus. John seemed to be saying this at the burial of Jesus.

Nicodemus acknowledged Jesus only as a teacher from God. He and the others saw the miracles Jesus did, and they knew something: only a man from God could do such miracles.

In essence, Nicodemus was asking, “Who are you?” The miracles show that God is with you, but you are claiming to be the Messiah, the Son of God. Are you—truthfully—in all honesty?

Note that Jesus did not answer Nicodemus directly. He saw into the empty, searching heart of Nicodemus

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and saw the honesty of his question. So, Jesus went right to the heart of the matter. Miracles and signs were not what was important. What was important was for Nicodemus to be changed: changed spiritually, changed within, and changed completely—to undergo such a spiritual change that it could only be described as being born again.

Surely Nicodemus’ colleagues among the religious leaders would not be happy to know he is consorting with a radical. He goes to find Jesus at night, a time of literal darkness, when he can move through the city without being seen. He has a public reputation

to protect, the status that goes along with his power and authority. At the same time, he takes a risk, coming to Jesus to make an important claim in verse 2: “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God; no one could perform the miraculous signs that you are doing if God was not with him.”

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Nicodemus tries to establish himself as a friend, although a secretive one, by saying he knows Jesus is godly. He puts himself out there, showing he thinks differently from his cohorts, perhaps thinking he has gone as far as he needs to go, but what he does not fully understand is that Jesus is more than a teacher.

In the rest of the passage, Jesus points to Nicodemus' limited grasp of whom he is talking to; it comes as no surprise to those who have read ahead. We know Jesus is the Messiah. Nicodemus learns in real time. He returns in John 7:50-51,

during Jesus' second visit to Jerusalem, listening at the temple and reminding his colleagues to give Jesus a full hearing. In chapter 19, Nicodemus is seen bringing spices for Jesus' burial. His understanding grows and changes his life.

If we had the chance for a hush-hush heart-to-heart talk with Jesus, what would we say to show we know who he is? Would we stay with him after we find out

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how much more there is to learn? What would we risk to know him better?

So, what are the lessons we can learn from this Scripture reading from John?

This Scripture reading from John teaches that salvation requires a spiritual "rebirth" (born of water and Spirit), that is initiated by God, and is essential

to enter the kingdom of God. It also highlights God's immense love for the world, resulting in the gift of Jesus for eternal life, and it emphasizes that belief in Jesus brings rescue rather than condemnation.

Please bow your heads as I pray.

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Lord Jesus, like Nicodemus, we come to you seeking deeper understanding. We pray to be born again of the Spirit. Blow away the rigid rules that hold us back from trusting, risking, and loving. Transform our lives from the inside out, helping us to walk in the newness of life you offer. Heavenly Father, thank you for loving the world so much that you gave your only Son. Thank you that we do not perish but can have eternal life. Let this truth sink into our hearts, freeing us from fear and filling us

with hope. We ask this in the name of your Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. **Amen.**