

Come and See: Encounters with Jesus in the Gospel of John

Nicodemus the Know-it-All – John 2:23-3:3

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Everybody Wants to Rule the World

Between all our social media and news outlets, we've no shortage of people who claim to know what's wrong with the world and how to fix it. Very few people you run into don't think something in the world needs to *change*.

But how we make change happen, that's something we disagree about.

It can't be argued, Jesus changed the world. The question is, how did He do it? We find part of the answer to that question in His conversation with a Pharisee named Nicodemus in John chapter 3.

He changed the world by inviting people to follow Him.

Born again (and again and again...)

John 2:23-3:3

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. He'd have been groomed from boyhood to be a religious and political leader. His training in the Old Testament would be extensive and he'd have spent years learning under a Rabbi. The Pharisees were his sect and they believed God had abandoned Israel because of their failure to obey Mosaic Law. So, they instigated an insane regimen of rule following.

John gives us hints that Nicodemus might be inviting Jesus over to see if Jesus is on his side. The end of chapter 2 says Jesus did not entrust Himself to anyone and John 3 starts by marking that Nicodemus invited Jesus over at night.

So, the tone of his first question might be kissing up:

"Oh, *Rabbi*, we know you're from God. What wonderful signs you perform."

Jesus cuts through that garbage like a lightsaber through ice cream.

"Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

In the Greek, the word for 'again' is also the word for 'from above'. So, something like 'born again from God' might be in view here. The key to understanding the idea is who Jesus is talking to. He is talking to a Pharisee who believed that being born a Jew made you God's chosen. He's talking to someone who is *righteous* and telling him that he has been *wrong*.

Tim Keller comments:

"...[Jesus is] pressing him on his smug *self*-satisfaction...What did you have to do, Jesus is asking, with being born? Did you work hard at the privilege of being born...You don't earn or contribute *anything* to being born. It is a free gift of life. So, it is with the new birth."¹

We also, as Jesus followers, may need to be 'born again'...and again...and again. We have a tendency to make Jesus in our own image and try to add Him to our agendas. But it is about His kingdom, not ours.

On the Dangers of Being a Know-It-All

John 3:4-3:8

If Nathaniel was the skeptic, Nicodemus stands in as the Know-It-All. The insider. The elite in power.

Nicodemus, contrary to most scholars, is continuing the conversation with Jesus here. He's using Jesus' metaphor and, possibly, even getting autobiographical.

Because Nicodemus says, "how can someone be born when they are old?"

Like, ok. So, God is doing something amazing here. But you're telling me it's going to radically rock my world. Yeah, I see some things are broken here, Jesus. I don't love everything my people, the Pharisees, are doing. But Jesus, I'm 65 years old. I've got a salary, a pension and two more years until retirement and feet in the sand in Jericho.

If you're going to completely renovate my life and, even more importantly, thousands of years of Jewish tradition, how are you going to do it? Put everybody back in the birth canal?

Jesus' response in one word: The Spirit. He goes so far as to tell Nicodemus 'You shouldn't be surprised' at all this.

Because what Jesus is about to do was predicted centuries before. The Lord revealed to the prophet Ezekiel:

²⁴ "For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. ²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. ²⁶ I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. ²⁸ Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God. (Ezekiel 36:24-28)

Our prevalent approach to change is to look to change systems and policies. Which, yes, sin is systemic, and the gospel is social. But fix a broken system but leave the people broken and, well, they'll just break the system again.

¹ Tim Keller, *Encounters with Jesus*, 34.

The Pharisees were using shame, fear, and intimidation to try to build God's Kingdom by perfecting the rules. They wanted the system. But God had revealed through Ezekiel, centuries before, that the way he'd bring change is by renovating the hearts of his people and giving them a new Spirit.

By water, Jesus is also pointing to John's Baptism that protested the temple and religious system by offering forgiveness for sins.

By saying flesh cannot birth this, Jesus is saying it cannot be a political, religious, or economic enterprise, it will be the work of God.

Then, Jesus talks about the wind. 'Wind' and 'Spirit' are the same word in Greek.

D.A. Carson comments on verse 8:

"The point is that the wind can be neither controlled nor understood by human beings...But that does not mean we cannot detect the wind's effects. We hear its sound, watch the swaying grasses, see the clouds scudding by, hide in fear before the worst windstorms. So, it is with the Spirit. We can neither control him nor understand him. But that does not mean we cannot witness his effects. Where the Spirit works, the effects are undeniable and unmistakable."²

We can tell God has moved because of the effects. We know his *character*—gracious, compassionate, patient, loving, forgiving, and kind. We know his *promises*—to be with us, to give us eternal life, to come again and stop pain and tears and dying.

But, for all that, God is still a mystery. We cannot control or understand Him. We are not cars who use God as a battery to power us where we want to go, we are leaves carried along by a tornado.

Job learned this truth. In Job 38, when God answers out of the whirlwind, He asks Job if He was there when the universe was measured, and the earth was made. The subtext is, there are things you can't know. God operates with an intelligence that is orders of magnitude beyond what we could possibly even comprehend.

Jesus invites us into the way He changes the world by inviting us to be blown by the Wind of His Spirit. We go where He tells us to go. We trust Him.

Truth at its Most Offensive

John 3:9-15

Now Nicodemus is stunned, he can only whisper: 'How?'

And Jesus' answer silences Nicodemus. He does not speak to Jesus again. Because His answer is truth at its most offensive. The real change will come through the cross.

² D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, pg. 197

He alludes to Numbers 21:3-7 where the children of Israel are plagued by venomous snakes and Moses is told to lift a statue of a snake. Anyone who looks on it is not affected by the poison. Jesus uses this strange story to allude to His being 'lifted up' on the cross.

For Nicodemus, and for us, this is a difficult concept to accept. Who would have guessed God would change the world by allowing Himself to be murdered by His people? Who could imagine the Son of Man would come not to be served, but to serve?

Paul puts it this way in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25:

¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written:

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."^[c]

²⁰ Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. (1 Corinthians 1:18-25)

It is a stumbling block still. And John's gospel does not tell us whether Nicodemus tripped on it into the light or back into the darkness. We see Nicodemus standing up, albeit weakly, for Jesus in John 7:50-51. The last time we see Nicodemus is in John 19:39, he helps take Jesus' body off the cross and prepare it for burial.

Nicodemus stands as a question to all us know-it-alls, will we do this our way, or God's way? Will we change the world with our force, power, and arguments? Or will we follow the one who 'so loved the world He gave His only Son' and love the world instead of trying to rule it?

Discussion Questions:

Open Up:

Describe a time when you had a radical shift in your thinking about life, the universe, and everything. What inspired that change? What did it feel like while you were going through it?

Dig In:

Read John 2:23-3:15.

1. How do you imagine Nicodemus? How is he feeling as this conversation progresses? What part of what Jesus says is sticking with him?
2. How have you understood the idea of being 'born again'?
3. What does it mean to follow Jesus as a *person*, not an idea, morality, or philosophy?
4. Where do you need reminding of your inability to control or understand God?

Prayer:

Share a place where you think you know what's wrong with the world. Pray and invite Jesus to speak to and challenge you in that area.