

## NICODEMUS

We sometimes hear of people on the television and radio, - and on the media, in general, - being described as Christians ... What does it mean to be a Christian? Is there any one characterization, or is it a 'loose' label we attach to ourselves, or is it a way of life we live based upon certain criteria? ... The story of Nicodemus gives us the answer. He was a thoroughly religious man, and yet the basics of faith relating to Jesus Christ eluded him. In the conversation we are about to study, we see how he was not able to fathom the fundamental aspects of true religion.

Religion is complicated because we have made it complicated, and that is the reason there are so many religions. We tend to inject into religion what we consider ought to be there. We start from the basic concept that religion is about God, but then we formulate it into a set of guidelines that suits us, rather than accepting what the Bible simply and plainly says. The Bible presents God clearly, but we adapt it to suit our preconceptions. And that was the problem with Nicodemus for from childhood, he had been taught traditions and beliefs from his peers, rather than being taught what the Scriptures said.

And that is the reason we need to understand the kind of religious society he belonged to, ... **Jn. 2:13** *And the Jews' passover was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem ...* The religion of Judaism directed the thoughts of the people. Judaism had a strong hold over them, and one of the most anticipated festivals in the calendar was Passover. Jews came from far and wide to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem.

Jesus also travelled the distance from Galilee for Passover in the holy city. On this occasion, in chapter two, He entered the temple and was disgusted when He saw how the moneychangers were desecrating the house of God, and He dealt with them, **14** *And found in the temple those that sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the changers of money sitting;* **15** *And when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables;* **16** *And said unto them that sold doves, Take these things hence; make not my Father's house an house of merchandise.* **17** *And his disciples remembered that it was written, The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up.*

And this further aroused interest in Him, - the people were fascinated by Him, and they wanted to know more about Him, **18** *Then answered the Jews and said unto him, What sign shewest thou unto us, seeing that thou doest these things? ...* The language here indicates this was the type of question men of authority and

religious knowledge would have asked, <sup>19</sup> Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. The people thought He was referring to the Temple, - ... as was understandable ... <sup>20</sup> Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days? ... But He didn't mean Zerrubabel's temple which was restored by King Herod the Great; instead He was talking about another temple (symbolically-speaking) ... <sup>21</sup> But he spake of the temple of his body. <sup>22</sup> When therefore he was risen from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them; and they believed the scripture, and the word which Jesus had said. ... They didn't understand ... but that did not matter, because of the fact He caught their attention ... <sup>23</sup> Now when he was in Jerusalem at the passover, in the feast day, many believed in his name ... Fantastic! ... ? ... when they saw the miracles which he did. <sup>24</sup> But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, <sup>25</sup> And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man.

Great! ... That's all you have to do! Say you believe, and, - lo and behold, - you automatically become a believer! It is as basic as that! many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did. ... They were taken with His ability to work the supernatural.

Is that what it really means, though, to believe in Christ? Well, apparently not, because even though many *believed* in Him, He did not consider it sufficient for salvation, <sup>24</sup> But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men ... What does that mean? It means the way they decided to believe in Him was not acceptable to Him for it was *what* He did, - the miracles, - they believed in, and not *Who* He was. ... They saw Him as a miracle-worker, and not the Son of God. ... And that emphasises how to believe in Christ is not something light, or flimsy, or shallow. ... Truly believing in Christ is to know Him within your heart as your Saviour, to serve Him as your Master, so that you have the confidence that one day you shall leave this world and be with Him forever. ...

And when these people professed to believe, Jesus saw what lay behind their profession, - they simply were caught up with the spectacular, His miracles, but there was no inner work of grace, - no work of God towards salvation, - accomplished within them. ... <sup>24</sup> Jesus did not commit himself unto them ... Basically, He did not believe in their believing! They were believing because of His miracles ... they were not believing and accepting Him as the Son of God, the Messiah. He did not have faith in their faith because the motives for their believing was not because they saw Him as their Saviour ... but because they saw Him as a miracle-man who fed their hunger for the extraordinary (v.18).

And then, later that evening, out into the darkness, a highly-respected Jewish leader who had seen these things happening came and asked Jesus a further probing question, on behalf of others, **Jn. 3:2** Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. ... He had the same fascination as the people in Jn. 2. ... He was engrossed in what Jesus was able to do, and with the authority He was speaking.

Now, Nicodemus himself was an extremely clever and well-respected theologian ... and that is what Jesus acknowledged in v.10, **Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel?** Σὺ εἶ ὁ διδάσκαλος τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ. ... It is interesting that the Greek contains the definite article, which means Nicodemus had the title of *the* teacher of Israel ... He wasn't just *a* teacher, but he was *the* teacher in Israel! He was a formidable authority, - as far as his religion was concerned! He was like the top professor in the Jewish university which trained men to become rabbis! ... He was a very religious person, but also a very anxious man because he heard Jesus saying things he had never considered before and it made him concerned about how and what he believed.

He is worried ... What if my religion is holding me back from true religion? There are questions my religion has not the sufficient answers to .... What if all I believe is wrong, or incomplete? What if I am pretending, but I'm not a true believer?! What if all this knowledge I have is only serving to blind me?! ... And that is why he came to speak with Jesus, - he was really worried!

According to the Jewish historian Josephus, there were six thousand Pharisees in the land of Judah at that time. They were devout and conscientious about what they believed. They read and studied the Old Testament and all the religious laws associated with it, written by the various rabbis. 'Pharisee' means 'separated', and they were *separated* from the people to pursue this revered life of study and contemplation ... but what if it was all in vain? ... And Nicodemus came to the Saviour one evening, and asked, *Jesus, please help!!*

Paul helps us to understand the kind of person Nicodemus was, - by the way, 'Nicodemus' means 'conqueror' (νικος, victory; δῆμος, the people) ... He was circumcised the eighth day, he belonged to the stock of Israel, he was a member of one of their tribes, - most likely the tribe of Judah, - he was a Hebrew of the Hebrews, he was a zealous Pharisee, and as far as the keeping of the law was concerned, he was exemplary! (cf. Phil. 3:4-6) ... Nevertheless, when he met and listened to Jesus, he knew there was much missing in his life, and that is

why he came to the Saviour by night. ... Why did he come to Jesus by night, and not during the day? ... Well, some commentators suggest he didn't want anyone to see him, - a respectable theological religious leader, - speaking to Jesus ... much less seeking the answer to a question from Him! ... Perhaps, also, he went to Jesus by night because he was busy during the day ...

Whatever the reason, - and it doesn't really matter ... as long as he came, - he started the conversation by saying to Jesus, <sup>2</sup> *Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.* ... Jesus, that is what our evidence reveals, - You are a teacher ... and he and the people like him would have put a lot of deep thought into it. You come from God, God has sent You, for God is with You, as the performing of these miracles indicates. ... This religious man 'believed' for he saw signs which clearly pointed him in that direction. He was 'working it out' by his own means ... but he wanted to more. He was used to going up to the temple, and standing there, and that was how he 'believed' in God, - it wasn't a relationship, but it was a ritual ... an empty ritual which did not reach into his soul. ... And since he had met Jesus, he realised he did not know God at all!

That is why he was confused, and that is also what was holding him back, because remember how Jesus would not commit Himself to those who had 'believed' in 2:24. ... When they saw his signs, they believed, - they had some kind of religious experience t ... but if they had *not* have seen His signs, they would *not* have believed. ... If they had simply heard Jesus teaching and preaching, it would not have had an effect. ... But faith is not because of what you can see ... true faith is trusting and believing in God because of what He shows you in His Word. In other words, believing in Christ is not generated from within, - if it was left to us, we would never know it. Instead, believing in Christ is coming to believe what His Word says.

It is like how some people need to experience a 'feeling' or some form of 'awareness' before they are willing to believe in Jesus, - it has to be tangible, touchable, - if it is literally not in front of them, they won't believe it. ... But believing in Jesus as Saviour is completely contrary for it is a work of the transformation of the heart. What I mean is, it is a process of a change taking place inside your life when Jesus Christ enters, takes over, and changes it. ... It is a work He does, and it is not a transient experiential faith which 'comes and goes', dependent upon a mood. ... Believing in Jesus is knowing Him as the Master of your whole being, - all things revolve around Him.

As we are shown in Jn. 2:24, - **Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men**, - there is 'believing' and ... there is *believing!* ... Nicodemus and his friends sought to believe based upon what they saw, - how Jesus *performed* miracles and appealed to their senses ... but there had been no work of God's grace within their hearts ... They recognised Jesus for the spectacular, but not for the salvation. They wanted Jesus for what He could give them, rather than what they could give Him. ... So, at the beginning, Nicodemus saw Jesus only as a miracle-worker, but not yet as his Saviour. The claims of the Gospel had not penetrated his soul. He was viewing God from the perspective of a *religion* and not a *relationship*. Consequently, religion had confused Nicodemus, for what he believed got in the way of truly knowing and understanding Christ.

No one can be a Christian without believing, and no one can be a Christian if they don't believe the right way, and the only right way to believe, - if you want to be a Christian, - is to believe in Jesus Christ as your Saviour. Believe that He came into this world for you. Believe that He died on the cross for you to take away your sins. Believe and live for His glory. For all that He has done for you, there is nothing too much that you can do for Him ... and that is what changes your life, - you belong to Him, and you want to please Him in all you do.

But Nicodemus still could not see this. He was blinded by his religious knowledge ... And when he saw Jesus performing miracles in the temple, he was taken with the signs, but not with the Saviour.

Nicodemus was really struggling. He was genuinely trying to understand Jesus. If understanding Jesus could be confined to 'religion', and creeds, Nicodemus could have done it. In many ways, it's easier to go to a church or a synagogue and live by the customs and rituals, - light the candles, kneel before an altar, etc. ... but it is through a personal knowledge alone that you come to know the Saviour.

Nicodemus was finding it so impossible ... And that is why, - when he introduced himself and spoke to Jesus, - he did not really know what to say ... and what he did say wasn't even a question. Such a clever and articulate man, and yet he was at a loss to know how to address the Saviour. ... And that is because, at the beginning, he had no relationship with Jesus.

Isn't it beautiful though, that something, - we know it as the Holy Spirit, - was working inside him, and he was brought to Jesus. In the plan established in eternity, the Lord came all the way from Galilee to Jerusalem for this meeting

with Nicodemus ... and we also acknowledge how Nicodemus went and found the Lord, [Lk. 11:9 seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.](#) ... Jesus always makes Himself known to those who are searching for Him, - Nicodemus found the Saviour. ... He found out where the Lord was, and he went and spoke with Him, - even though it was night, and it was dark ... not just dark outside, but also dark with the soul of Nicodemus. ... Oh, but Jesus is too busy to have time for me! No, Jesus is never too busy for those who seek Him ... for He has placed it within you to seek Him! You are coming to Him because of the grace He has supplied towards you! ...

And notice how Nicodemus courteously called Jesus, 'Rabbi'. He had a reverence for the Saviour. When the Holy Spirit leads you to meet Jesus, your heart is changed to receive Him. ... Not many of Nicodemus' associates in the Sanhedrin would have spoken to Jesus the way Nicodemus did, but that is because the Lord was working in this man's life. ... While other members of the Sanhedrin would have accused Jesus of blasphemy, and accused Him of taking the Lord's name in vain, and of working by the power of the devil ... Nicodemus, though, approached Jesus respectfully, giving the honour due to His name ... Nicodemus, an admired and esteemed rabbi, addressed the Saviour, [Jn. 3:2 Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God](#) ... that is how Nicodemus addressed the Lord, - that is the reverence with which he spoke to Jesus. Now, Nicodemus was a rabbi, - he was greeted every day of his life ... and to be called a rabbi, he had been trained by the very best, and he had certificates and academic documents to prove it. He had risen to be recognised as one of the most influential rabbis of his day ... and yet he respectfully addressed Jesus, - a man from Galilee, with no formal education, and no university endorsements, - as 'rabbi'. ... That is how the Holy Spirit was stirring within him. ... Indeed, *Jesus could do miracles, he couldn't* ... and he humbly recognised that. ... But he required more information, and the Holy Spirit guided him along to Jesus..

From the perspective of Jesus, Nicodemus had a barrier he yet needed to overcome for Nicodemus was questioning with his mind, but his heart was still wrapped up with religion. Religion with all its laws and restrictions were blinding him from the truth of Who Jesus was, and that is why, - for all his education, - he struggled to know what to say to Jesus, [Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him](#) ... And? ... What are you trying to say Nicodemus?! ... You are not asking a question, are you? What are you saying? ... Jesus did not make it difficult for him though, because we 'met' him, <sup>3</sup> [Jesus answered and said unto](#)

him ... Nicodemus had made a declaration, a confession ... he had not asked a question, using words from his lips, but Jesus could see into his heart, and Jesus could see all the many questions simmering within his soul.

Nicodemus was earnestly seeking, and Jesus came to be found, for even though Nicodemus did not seem to know what to say, nevertheless, Jesus answered him, <sup>3</sup> Jesus *answered and said unto him*, ...

Some people, - even the most articulate, - feel they don't know what to say to Jesus, but when you make the move to come to Him, and He looks inside your heart, He knows you are searching ... and your searching will never be complete until you find the Saviour. His Word says, **Is. 55:6** *Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near* ... and that is what Nicodemus was doing. ... He would not have thought of it like that, but looking back on it ... he would have remembered wandering in the darkness, through the streets of Jerusalem, and finding Jesus.

Jesus is always found by those who seek Him. He will never hide from those who are earnestly searching for Him. It might be a difficult process. They might not realise, at the time, what they are doing ... but when they look back, they can see the paths the Lord set before them to tread ... and when they travelled along those paths, they were led to the Saviour.

It's true that Nicodemus found the Saviour, but even before Nicodemus went looking for Jesus, Jesus had already to Jerusalem to be found.

We'll come back to Nicodemus, and we'll see what Jesus said to him. ... The story of the Gospel is one that presents Jesus Christ to ordinary people like you and me. It is the good news that Jesus came into this world to die for us on a cross and to purchase us for Himself by the shedding of His precious blood. ... Jesus 'entered the darkness' and came looking for us, - He had an appointment to keep with you, so that you would find Him as your personal Saviour, your salvation.