

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

There Was a Man John 3:1

Intro: Have you ever known someone who *refused* to go to the doctor or dentist? Their refusal wasn't because they couldn't afford the treatment or were scared of the examination but only that they just didn't want to hear any bad news. They didn't want to hear that something *might* be wrong with them. What it comes down to is that they aren't willing to face the truth. This is a real problem because in order to receive any real benefit from a doctor or a dentist, a person must first be willing to admit that they are sick, that they have a problem that needs medical attention. This is true in all fields of *medicine* and it's true in *business*. All successful businesses first identify a real need and then they set about meeting that need – at a profit. What's true in medicine and business is also true in spiritual matters. Thus, the Bible spends a lot of time revealing humanity's great need so that an individual can acknowledge their need and then turn to God to have that need met.

This same focus of biblical revelation is found in *John ch3*. We've come to the record of the 2000 yr old conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. A dialogue that quickly turns into a monologue, a discourse in which Jesus gradually reveals not only the *need* for salvation but also the *means* by which salvation is acquired by & accomplished in man. This chapter emphasizes the necessity of the new birth and for faith in Jesus Christ but before it does this; it first of all stresses man's need for these things and it does it in a very subtle way.

As we've seen, the first 2 chapters of John are primarily focused on the person of Jesus. At the same time, they have also commented on the miserable state of man. In *ch1*, John tells us that when the true Light shone in the world, men as a whole did not respond to Him (*10-11*). At the end of *ch2*, there was a dynamic happening between Jesus and the crowds in that many of them seemed to believe in Jesus when they saw His miracles but that “*Jesus did not commit Himself to them because He knew all men*” (*24*). It is this failure of men in the realm of spiritual things that is now John's theme and Nicodemus is offered up to us as his first concrete example.

Have you ever wondered why this conversation is recorded? Jesus must have spoken with hundreds of people during this particular feast but why is this conversation recorded over all the others? Content? This is one of the greatest chapters in the Bible but I'm sure He shared this truth a thousand times over while He walked this earth. No, the reason this conversation is recorded is Nicodemus. John's point is subtle but visible. I mentioned it last time as the link between **ch2** and **ch3** – the **repetition** of the word **man** in **2:25** and again in **3:1**. We're told in **vs25** that Jesus knew what was in **man** and thus did not commit Himself to **man**. Nicodemus is a **man**. So, what the author would have us understand is that Nicodemus is introduced here primarily as a representative of the human race. In fact, he is a representative of all men standing as sinners before God. Let's just see how old Nick measures up.

1– Well, as representatives go, Nic was a pretty good one, at least from a human perspective. If we had lived during that time and were forced to select a man to represent us; someone who would embody the best of our culture, education, ethics and faith – Nicodemus would have fit the bill. Isn't that what we do today when we vote? Our intention is to send our best and brightest to Baton Rouge or Washington D.C. to represent our interests. We rarely do, but at least that is our intention. It would be the same here: we wouldn't have chosen any Roman officials because they were all corrupt. Nor would we choose any Greek philosophers because they didn't know much about religion. We certainly would choose some dumb schlub off the street. No, we would have chosen Nicodemus. He wasn't the greatest or the most famous but he had everything he needed. And yet, despite his impressive list of credentials, Nicodemus was a spiritual failure because he had never found God. He's the most polished up, cleaned up person in the natural but Jesus is going to tell him, "**That's not good enough. You must be born again.**"

I think it's important that, before we jump into the deep theology of **ch3**, we look at some of Nic's accomplishments

Pharisee – Nic was a **Pharisee**. For modern Christians this has negative connotations, mainly because of the grief Jesus was always giving them. We associate the word Pharisee as being synonymous with hypocrite and view their sect as nothing more than ritualistic religion and we wouldn't be far from the truth, at least in Jesus' day. But what we should understand is

that the Pharisees began their sect with very good intentions – to preserve God’s Word and abide in it, live it! All 365 commandments in the Mosaic Law, everything written in the Mishnah, all the traditions – both oral and written. They determined they would spend their lives performing it – keeping it.

When Jesus arrived, the Jewish religion had devolved into merely an **ethical cult** and the Pharisees were the primary proponents of the **ethical way of life**. Their particular sect had devolved into dead orthodoxy. But, in some ways, the Pharisees were possibly the best people in the country. **1) There wasn’t very many** of them (6000 – select group); **2) they were serious about the Law**; **3) they were the theological conservatives** of their day. They believed the OT was the revealed Word of God and that the Pentateuch contained an inspired code of ethics that was to be believed and practiced literally. The greatest glory of the **Pharisaic sect** lay in the fact that it **applied the law literally**. It was the goal of **the scribes** to **work out the exact meaning of the law**; it was the determined purpose of **the Pharisees** to **keep it**.

As a Pharisee, Nic represented those in his day (and ours) who seek the meaning of life in religion but never find it. He belonged to the best Bible-study group in the best church in the country but he knew nothing about the personal, life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ on which the true church is established.

You might ask, “**If the Pharisees were such good people, why did Jesus always have such a problem with them?**” The main problem with the Pharisees was that even tho it was their own personal conviction to take God’s Law literally and try to live it all comprehensively, they often times looked down on and condemned those who didn’t. This should be a great warning to us all. It’s scary how close in belief we really are to the Pharisees. We also are theological conservatives that take the Bible seriously and believe in holy living. The danger lies in expecting everyone else to hold to our own personal convictions. The main thing to understand about personal convictions is that they are first and foremost – **personal!** If God’s dealing with **you** about a particular thing, you may consider it a question of ethics while everyone one else will see it as a question of preference. I do not have the right to push my personal conviction on others & I certainly do not have the right to look down on or condemn them for not agreeing with me. If I do that, I’ve crossed over the line into Pharisaical

hypocrisy. If a brother is clearly violating Scripture, show him the chapter and verse but if it's merely a question of personal conviction

Nic was also a **scholar**. Evident because he's a Pharisee (great students of law). But, evident in another way too. Tho Nicodemus was a Jew, he had a Greek name. Generally, those who lived in Judea had Hebrew or Aramaic names but those in the upper echelons of society, who were exposed to both Greek and Jewish culture, often gave their kids 2 names, a Greek and a Hebrew one. This was true of Nic, which tells us he had a Greek education. Also, he apparently preferred his Greek name over his Hebrew name, which may mean he preferred Greek culture over Hebrew and may have been a Hellenist (**read OT in Greek and understood it in light of Greek philosophy**). So, it was a highly educated man as well as a highly moral and ethical man who came to Jesus on that night.

Nicodemus represents many of the highly educated of our day. We've been told for some time that education is the solution to the world's problems. Because of this, we have the most highly educated mass of people in the world today that the human race has ever seen. Still the problems are not solved and the unrest that characterizes our day is just as evident on campuses (Berkley) as it is in the ghettos (Ferguson, Baltimore). **If the example of Nicodemus teaches us anything, it's that education is *not* the answer to man's spiritual unrest and longing.**

Nic was also a **politician**. John reference to "***a ruler of the Jews***" means Nic was a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest legislative body in Israel combining all the powers of the 3 branches of US government. Under Rome, they're a little restricted but they're still the **chief Jewish authority** in Israel. They conducted trials, investigated heresies, wrote laws, and carried on most of the official dealings between the people of Judea and the Roman authorities. Nicodemus was a member of this exclusive, governing body. He is also believed to be from one of the highest ranking families in Jerusalem. Some even say he was the brother of Josephus the historian and if that is true, his family was the 3rd wealthiest in all of Jerusalem. So, not only was he an extremely pious, highly educated politician, but he also came from one of the most distinguished and best-known families in the entire country. More important than a Rockefeller, Carnegie, Kennedy or Bush – in fact, he was all these things rolled into one person.

Isn't that the kind of person you'd want to represent you? Of course! But the point of his story, the reason John records his conversation with Jesus is that in spite of all his achievements, in spite of excelling in education, politics, culture and religion, Nicodemus still had a great need – he still needed to know God. It is precisely because he didn't know God that he was psychologically "ill at ease," unhappy, lost and spiritually blind.

Some people may find this disturbing. How can a man who's achieved everything humanly possible still be unhappy? How can the achievers of this world be so lost? The answer comes in the story. The 1st thing Jesus tells Nicodemus is that all men need a new birth. Nic never achieved the solutions to life because the solutions to life are spiritual and no one is capable of seeing them unless they have come alive spiritually.

What Jesus is saying: the starting point of Christian life is **spiritual rebirth**. Before **new birth**, man is a **child of wrath**, **alienated** from God, having no real understanding of spiritual things (Nic). 1st, God must **plant saving faith** in his heart, for not even the faith is **of ourselves; it's the gift of God** (Eph 2:8). Then God brings the words of Scripture to our attention. Then, the Holy Spirit takes those Scriptures and plants them in the womb of our heart with the result that life is conceived. Only then can man declare, "**If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation**" (2 Cor 5:17). True, man still retains the old nature, but now he **begins** to see things differently and the new life within him starts to **grow**.

This puts the lie to one of the greatest misconceptions of our day: good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell. That's not the case because that's not the criteria. There are going to be a lot of very good people in hell and there are going to be some very bad people in heaven. There will be murderers, adulterers, the sexually immoral, idolaters...the worst dregs of society will be present in heaven while the best of humanity will feel the fires of hell. See, only those who accept Jesus Christ as their Savior will go to heaven and only those who reject Him will find themselves in hell. It's not a matter of performance or position, it's merely a matter of choice.

The full meaning of the new birth will be clearer as we go thru the chapter, but we shouldn't close without at least offering an example of the kind of transformation the new birth will produce. Nic won't really do for this, because we're never told how he responded to Jesus' teaching. Far as we

know, he never understood it or ever believed it. Still, there is another excellent example in the Bible of a man who did.

This man was a rabbi, just like Nic. He came from a good family and was versed in Greek as well as Hebrew culture, just like Nic. This man had studied with the best men of his day. He was a Pharisee, like Nicodemus. He was even (in a sense) a politician, since he was associated in some way with the Sanhedrin. He put down sectarian groups that threatened his brand of Judaism. Still there came a time, as this learned rabbi was on the way to Damascus with papers to arrest and imprison Christians in that city, when he met Jesus Christ and received new life from him.

Later in life he wrote about it, saying that all his achievements, like those of Nicodemus, had really proved **worthless**. In fact, they were **worse** than worthless—they were actually **harmful**—for they had kept him from true saving faith in God's Son. (**Phil 3:4-8**). Not only did he suffer the loss of all his achievements, he already considered them lost so that he might gain Christ. It wasn't that his life achievements were worthless in themselves but compared to the greatness of the excellence of the knowledge of Jesus Christ, they really were worthless.

This was the Apostle Paul's experience. Is it yours? Does this describe your life? Or are you still trying to discover a life of contentment and blessing through your own limited achievements and human understanding? It will not come through your own efforts. It will only come through the **new birth** found and expressed by faith in the Lord Jesus.

If you have experienced the new birth in Jesus, Are you still trying to find fulfillment in the things this world has to offer? It's time for you to discover the greatness of the excellence of the knowledge of Jesus Christ because, in the end, that's all we're really going to have, right? 😊