

# Nicodemus In the Night

John 3, especially verses 11-17  
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Martin Luther dubbed one verse the Gospel in a nutshell: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16) Often behind the goal posts at football games we see “John 3:16” held proud on placards. Many of us memorized it as children in Sunday School. But we often overlook that it is a quote lifted from a real person’s real conversation with Jesus. Their conversation was so rich and so dense that it still reverberates through the Church.

Nicodemus was a supporting player to Christ’s great drama as told by John. He first appeared in the middle of the night. In his next appearance, he was arguing with other Pharisees and the priests that Jesus deserved a fair trial. (John 7:50-52). In that passage we also learned that Nicodemus was not from Galilee, a fact confirmed by his Greek name. In his final appearance, Nicodemus assisted Joseph of Arimathea in claiming and burying Jesus body. This is all we know for certain about Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews.



The first lecture I ever heard on those facts about Nicodemus was delivered during the winter of 1975 in a course on the gospel of John. Our instructor was a doctoral candidate who was writing his dissertation on this chapter. He was researching a very sticky idea, that Nicodemus was not only a Pharisee but was also active in the early church. His hypothesis was that the only reason we read about him in John’s gospel was that Nicodemus had already died before John put ink to paper.

There was one other thing we can know for certain. Nicodemus himself was John’s source for this conversation. There were no other eyewitnesses. That night was a life changer for Nicodemus. So much so, that John wrote this very dense chapter of quotes from Christ that were life changing for Nicodemus. There is so much to dive after here, so much subject matter worthy of a full sermon series; but today as we walk with Christ through this Lent we

will focus on that most famous verse in John's writing. "For God so loved the world. . ." and its tie-in with an Old Testament story Jesus and Nicodemus knew well.

John wrote that Nicodemus came to meet Jesus by night, but not why. Was Nicodemus afraid of the other Pharisees? Had he asked his depth questions in public and Jesus said, "If you can stop by tonight, we can talk about this one on one." Personally, I like the second idea better, so let's assume Christ saw something in Nicodemus that made him want to spend time with him one-on-one.

Nicodemus spoke first, "Rabbi, we know you are sent from God, because no one could do miracles like changing water into wine at that wedding without God's power."<sup>ii</sup> (John 3:2) His first question was about how one can be born again after growing old, and Christ explained. Then Nicodemus asked a clarifying question, "How?" In his reply, Jesus referred to an account from Numbers both men had read and discussed in synagogue as the Torah was read completely every year.

### **The Snake of Fiery Copper, Numbers 21:4-9**



They set out from Mount Hor along the Red Sea Road, a detour around the land of Edom. The people became irritable and cross as they traveled. They spoke out against God and Moses: "Why did you drag us out of Egypt to die in this godforsaken country? No decent food; no water—we can't stomach this stuff any longer."

So God sent poisonous snakes among the people; they bit them and many in Israel died. The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke out against God and you. Pray to God; ask him to take these snakes from us."

Moses prayed for the people.

God said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it on a flagpole: Whoever is bitten and looks at it will live."

So Moses made a snake of fiery copper and put it on top of a flagpole. Anyone bitten by a snake who then looked at the copper snake lived.<sup>iii</sup>

Physicians use two bronze snakes on a pole, the caduceus, as their symbol of the medical profession (See clipart.) as they have for millennia. As a Greek, Nicodemus also knew that ancient medical symbol. Christ linked to the Moses story of bronze snakes lifted up with his own crucifixion, "... so must the Christ be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life." (John 3:15)

Can you also see the parallel between the Moses' bronze snake on a pole and Christ on a cross that Nicodemus could? One needs to look up to be healed from a sin caused disease.

Moses' peoples' sin was not a massive breaking of the Ten Commandments. Their sin was much closer to taking a bite of forbidden fruit. They were whining, complaining, and questioning God about a needed detour. The writer of Numbers was clear, God sent poisonous snakes to punish the people. The people realized their sin and not the snake bites was the real cause for their illness and repented. They asked for healing. God answered Moses' prayer on their behalf by providing them with a simple act of faith, choose to look up at the bronze snakes and be healed. They could still choose to said, "That's way too easy!" and continued in their lack of faith in God's plan. But those who looked up were healed.

Why this link between a difficult story about a bronze snake on a pole and the Cross? And for me, perhaps for you too, what makes the idea of God sending snakes as punishment so hard to read are the plain words of Christ that follow, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. God didn't send his Son into the world to judge (other translations say "condemn") the world, but that the world might be saved through him."<sup>iv</sup>

In his writings to Methodist preachers, John Wesley advised us to not dwell on or preach what we don't understand and instead preach "the plain command of Christ" that we do understand. So, while I may want to rationalize away the idea of God punishing people with snake bites, I won't. Instead, I will simply add to my file of questions for the night I get to sit with one-on-one with Christ as Nicodemus did.

What I will do is proclaim what I do understand. If you are burdened by sin, no matter how small, no matter how large, all you need to do is look to Christ and he will heal you.

Christ's primary purpose in coming to humankind was and is to heal us from the consequences of sin. Looking to the cross provides us with a single grace-filled way to be freed from our sin. It was never Christ's purpose to condemn anyone to a lifetime or even an eternity away from God. Because, as Christ said to Nicodemus, a Pharisee with questions, "God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him." (John 3:17)

Last week and this, I have been blessed to lead a session of Methodist Heritage a Lay Speaking Ministry class that dips into our 300-year history of Methodist history and theology. It is subject matter every certified lay speaker, every licensed local pastor, every deacon, and every elder must meet required course hours. We must know our own story. We must know our theological doctrines. The required course for lay speakers is to be 10 to 15 hours in length and led by a clergy person whose education is complete. As the class leader who was preaching

from John 3 this week, the exercise forced me to the core of our teaching drawn from John Wesley's own experience of grace.

It was 1735 when Wesley was in his early thirties that he agreed to serve as a missionary priest in Georgia, North America. He served Savannah, which was incorporated for all of four years when he arrived. The brief history in every Book of Discipline since 1972 reports his service in Savannah as "less than a qualified success." He tried to introduce new hymns. In his journal he reflected on how these changes were rejected. He taught slaves to read and even lead one, Betty, to accept Christ for herself. The only written record of this is his journal, so we are left to imagine what the slave owners thought of Christian slaves who could read. And then he refused to give Sophie Hopkey communion after she married William Williamson outside of the church! Wesley had been courting Miss Hopkey himself, so one can see why she chose the magistrate over the priest to officiate at her nuptials.

One wonders if the Hopkey communion incident was as big a deal as new hymns and teaching slaves to read. But Wesley's parish leaders saw refusing to serve her communion as the golden opportunity to get rid of Wesley and he was charged with failure to execute the pastoral office. There was no separation of church and state in either Britain or the British colonies in 1737, so John Wesley was to face a grand jury over his action. Rather than go on trial, he fled Savannah one December night and took the first ship he could back to London.

At the same time, Wesley was in conversation with a Moravian pastor, Peter Boehler. Boehler served as Wesley's confessor as he bore the weight of a failed ministry. Wesley was in a state of deep depression often called "a dark night of the soul." Then on May 28<sup>th</sup>, 1738 he was persuaded to attend an evening Bible study. Here is his own testimony of what happened from his own journal entry the week it occurred.

"In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

"I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitefully used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there what I now first felt in my heart."

There are certain parallels between John Wesley and Nicodemus meeting Christ in the night. Both were already leaders of God's people when they were deeply convicted of their sin.

We don't know what convicted Nicodemus, but we do know that for Wesley it was fear that he had offended God in his failed ministry.

What Wesley felt that night was an assurance of salvation, that God loved him and that Christ came to not to condemn him, but that through Christ he could be saved.

Christ is willing to do the same for us today.

Shall we pray?

Christ, you know us. You know our sins and you know our struggles. You know we fear displeasing you, we fear failing, and we fear the anger of others. In our fears, we come to you, lift our eyes to your cross and ask for you to redeem us again.

Thank you for your great grace in loving us all. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> I checked my old transcripts to see if I could find his forgotten name. Professors names were not listed and any notes I had from that class I lost in a fire in the early 1980's.

<sup>ii</sup> Paraphrased for the flow of this series. As read in worship the Common English Bible (2011) translation of John 3:2 is “‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him.’”

<sup>iii</sup> The Message, Copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson

<sup>iv</sup> John 3:16-17, Common English Bible, 2011.

<sup>v</sup> There are numerous print and online reprints of this journal entry, even Wikipedia.

