

## **“Strangers in the Night”**

### **John 3:1-12**

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Stone Mountain, Georgia  
June 26, 2005

The favorite part of my house is my screened in back porch. Many of my days end there reading a book, talking to Jackie or thinking about you. I've had some lively discussions on that porch with family and friends as the sun was setting. It is a good conversation place.

I wonder if Nicodemus and Jesus sat on a porch the evening they talked? John doesn't tell us where they talked but he does share some of the content and it appears they discussed theology and religion.

I am not surprised because Nicodemus was devoutly religious. He was a member of two elite groups in Judaism, the Pharisees, the Torah observers, and Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. Membership in these groups gave him identity and notoriety. Talking religion occurred often for Nicodemus, I'm sure.

I suppose the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus has been analyzed as much as any and has been the text for an untold number of sermons. On the first night of his New York Crusade, eighty-six-year-old Billy Graham preached on this passage. He preached three sermons in this weekend crusade, which will probably be his last, and Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus was the first. That's how important America's most prominent evangelist considers this text.

Like many of you, I have studied this story many times and every time I walk away with a renewed appreciation for it. I have done that again and want to share with you how God spoke to me through it.

**The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus reminds me that faith and dialogue go together.** Engaging others in meaningful conversation and discussion is healthy. This is especially true if everyone at the table comes, as a friend with excellent listening skills said, “In a spirit of humility and with a willingness to suspend a given understanding long enough to be open for the search for truth.”

“My own eyes are not enough for me,” wrote C.S. Lewis. “I will see through those of others.”

Was this why Nicodemus came to Jesus that evening? Was he a seeker in search of another set of eyes or a spy on a mission from the Pharisees? There is no way to know, however, I am willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. Even if he was sent by others, I think he wanted to be there. His own eyes were not enough and he knew it.

When the father of a preschooler opened the newly developed pictures, he was surprised to see images of table legs, window seals and area rugs. He thought these pictures were placed in his packet by mistake until he realized these were his floors and tables. Who took these pictures and why? After a few minutes, it dawned on him. His four-year-old daughter had picked up the camera and taken these pictures. Then a greater reality emerged. This is her world. When the two of them are in the same room, this is what she sees, a perspective quite different from his but just as valid. This taught him a valuable lesson about seeing through others' eyes.

Who is helping you to see images of God unfamiliar to you and where He is at work in the world? Who is helping you to understand what it means to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God? Who is helping you hear the cries of the oppressed and disheartened? Who is helping you to see the devastating consequences of prejudice, greed, deceit or violence? Surely you don't think your eyes and ears are sufficient? I hope you are following Nicodemus' lead and seeking people that can help you see life from different perspectives on your search for truth and understanding.

**If you are, you have discovered that faith and questions go together.** They certainly did for Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was full of questions that evening, a position that was probably uncomfortable for him. As a leading teacher and authority on religious matters in Israel, he was accustomed to fielding questions, not asking them. When Jesus mentioned being born again to see the Kingdom of God, Nicodemus asked how this could happen. “How can a man be born again when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born” John 3:4. After Jesus’ explanation, he asked again, “How can this be?”

Why was Nicodemus asking so many questions? He had a teacher that cared about him and the truth, two traits of a great teacher.

The best teachers I had were the ones that were not afraid of questions. They valued curiosity, their own and mine. I always appreciated professors that began the semester by saying, “In this class, there are no dumb or silly questions.” I believe this is the sign of a good teacher, especially when discussing spiritual matters.

For you see, faith involves more than we know. Life is bigger than we are and so is God. Our quest to understand both should make us insatiably curious.

I know many look to their faith for answers and quite often find them. This is comforting and reassuring. However, the Christian faith also has a leavening influence and is meant to disturb and disrupt. An authentic faith will lead to questions that result in a greater understanding of God, life and self. Ask Nicodemus.

**This means, however, that faith and patience go together.** Most answers don’t come quickly, at least valid ones.

One of my favorite parts of the birth narratives is in Luke’s account. After the visit by the shepherds to the stable, Luke writes, “Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart” Luke 2:19. To ponder comes from the root word, “to weigh.” It is the quiet process of figuring out how events are related and impact life.

Do you think Nicodemus pondered after he left Jesus that night? I have no doubt that he did. I think he tossed endlessly the ideas discussed. Like Mary, he worked hard at discovering the deeper meaning of Jesus’ words and their impact upon him and others.

Does God care more about people than rules and rituals? Is the purpose of religion to usher people into the presence of God rather than keep them at a proper distance from God? Is it possible for everyone to be born of the Spirit from above and experience new beginnings? Is God really that accessible and helpful? Can honest dialogue in a spirit of humility actually lead to understanding and reconciliation among adversaries? Yes, I think Nicodemus had a lot to ponder.

I also think Jesus understood the need to be patient with Nicodemus and give him time to process their discussion. He knew he was unraveling centuries of cherished and strongly held traditions, replacing them with unfamiliar yet liberating concepts. Jesus was wise enough to know this would not happen overnight, if at all. The seed of knowledge and hope would take time to germinate and grow. Like a good teacher, he would be patient.

**The wait would be worth it, though, because Jesus knew that genuine faith would lead to changes,** changes that could transform lives. So radical and sweeping would be the changes, it would be like a rebirth.

When asked if he had been born again, one minister replied, “Oh yes, I have been born again and again and again.” I like his answer for I have felt the same way numerous times. Each revelation from God leads to the birth of new ideas that results in a change in attitude, relationships, values, priorities and even direction. It leads to a reorientation of life, modeled after the words and deeds of Jesus. It inspires me to pray, “Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven,” and then work passionately to bring that about.

This kind of transformation requires patience and encouragement, doesn’t it? The words I recently saw on a poster support this. “Be patient with me. God is not finished with me yet.” This is true for all of us.

Do you think the discussion that night with Jesus led to radical changes for Nicodemus? Did he embrace Jesus and adopt a new way of thinking and living? Did he challenge the status

quo? I would like to think so and perhaps his willingness to help Joseph of Arimathea bury the body of Jesus after the crucifixion indicates this.

What about you? Have you embraced Jesus and adopted his way of thinking and living? Have you opened your heart and life to God's Spirit, renewing your own spirit and working to bring His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven? I hope so, because there is such joy in being born again and again and again.