

## WHO WAS NICODEMUS?

### JESUS' LATE-NIGHT VISITOR



The first sentence of John's third chapter introduces us to a Pharisee named Nicodemus. To put Jesus' words in proper context, we need to find out who Nicodemus was.

There was a man of the **Pharisees**, named **Nicodemus**, a ruler of the Jews: – **John 3:1**

First, we are told that he was a Pharisee. **Pharisees** were one of two schools of thought at the time, a social movement. Their opposition were the **Sadducees**, and these two groups were often involved in conflict, mostly about the interpretation of the scriptures, including the resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:6-8) but also about the cultural and legal rules of the time. The Roman occupation of the time did not make things any easier. We may today see their arguments as trivial, but for the Jews of the time, literal interpretation of the law was paramount, even though your interpretation often depended on how you felt and what was convenient for you at that moment. We see in verse one that Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews. This means he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council, and as such he would not have been an insignificant figure in Jewish society.

Of the Pharisees of note that we read about in the New Testament, Paul probably stands out as one who knew the law in fine detail, yet he too first had to see the Light of Jesus on the road to Damascus before the law he had studied for so long made any sense. Paul testifies of his position as a Pharisee:

But when Paul perceived that the one part were Sadducees, and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee: of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question. And when he had so said, there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees: and the multitude was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both. – **Acts 23:6-8**

Paul knew how to capitalise on the situation. Noticing that there were both Pharisees and Sadducees present, he was quick to point out that he believed in the resurrection of the dead. The point is that he clearly identifies himself as a Pharisee.

The second time Nicodemus is mentioned is in John 7:50-51:

**Nicodemus** saith unto them, (he that came to Jesus by night, being one of them,) Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth? – **John 7:50-51**

It is clear that Jesus made a significant impact on Nicodemus and in these two verses, he seems to defend Jesus. He uses the law, that he knew well, and applies the principle that his fellow Pharisees conveniently ignored, that you cannot be judged unless you have been given the opportunity to defend yourself. If Nicodemus was like the rest of his Pharisee friends, he would have simply stayed out of the conflict and leave. Yet there was something about Jesus' teaching that struck him during his first visit, and it had a great impact on him.

The last time we read of him, is after the crucifixion:

And after this Joseph of Arimathaea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus. And there came also **Nicodemus**, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pound weight. – **John 19:38-39**

Again, Nicodemus was on the scene when the rest of the Jewish leaders were attending to their own business, having achieved their aim to kill Jesus. For him, the ritual of bringing spices was important, and showed a great level of respect for the Teacher he met that first evening.

What we have learnt of Nicodemus according to John's account, is that here is a man who, despite his religious upbringing, had the desire to find out more about Jesus' mission, not by studying the Old Testament, but hearing from Jesus Himself. A beautiful example of the same situation is found in the book of Job:

I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. – **Job 42:5**

Job says that he mostly heard of God through the mouths of others, where he heard their ideas about God, but now his own eyes have seen God. Isn't this a wonderful description? For Nicodemus it was not good enough to hear about Jesus from others, even if maybe he had the chance to witness one of Jesus' miracles. He had to visit Him and find out for himself. First-hand experience is always more valuable than just hearing about something.

We do not know if Nicodemus actually followed Jesus' command that he had to be born again. During his first encounter with Jesus we see what he twice questioned the idea of being born again, in verse 4:

Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? – **John 3:4**

and then again in verse 9:

Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? – **John 3:9**

The answer Nicodemus gives is not really an answer for something asked, but rather another question he asks in response to what he has been told.

Jesus first tells him that he has to be born of water and the Spirit (v5) and the second time almost rebukes him for being a "master" of Israel and yet he does not have any understanding:

Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? – **John 3:10**

We can only accept that Jesus' teaching had such an effect on Nicodemus that he would later challenge his fellow-Pharisees (John 7:50-51) and finally pay his respects to the crucified Jesus (John 19:38-39).

John is the only gospel writer to mention Nicodemus.