

Night Encounter

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Deserted streets stare at him in sinister silence. Cautiously, he steps out of the dark doorway into the pale moonlight. Although life in the city has taught him to distrust shadowy portals, tonight he prefers to stay in the dark, rather than be discovered meeting with that man. His impatience has overcome his fears.

He had been impressed by the stranger's behavior during the Feast. His bold condemnation of the Temple trade hadn't been the act of a mere agitator (John 2:13-22), for no politician would have dared as much. In his spiritual quest, he had listened to many teachers, but none could compare to this one. He wanted to know more.

Jesus' peculiar style fascinated him. His ideas didn't seem to come from any of the regular schools of thought nor from any known sect or political party. No one had ever displayed such a powerful and independent personality, or been so convincing.¹ What was the secret of His power, he wondered? And Jesus's magnetic spirituality intrigued him even more.

Nicodemus had spent his entire life in rabbinical schools preparing to be a doctor of the Scriptures. He held a seat on the Sanhedrin (John 3:1). It would have been difficult, indeed, for him to rise any higher. However, his situation and that of his nation filled him with unrest. He considered himself intellectually open minded and even his name ("victory for the people") revealed his outlook.² Yet neither training nor position could fill the missing dimension in his life. This feeling of unrest had led him to see in Jesus the characteristics of a possible reformer.

But to approach Jesus openly would endanger his reputation. The higher echelons of the religious es-

tablishment were pitted against this new teacher, so Nicodemus had set up a night meeting at an out-of-the-way location.

In order to avoid feeling intimidated by a visit that could easily become too personal, Nicodemus planned to approach Jesus as representing a group who shared his ideas (John 3:1-21; see also 2:23-25). Once at the meeting place, however, his fears disappeared. He felt accepted and understood. He also felt his inferiority and was forced to recognize that, although he possessed the title of doctor, it was Jesus who was of superior rank.

Nicodemus greeted the Carpenter of Nazareth as Rabbi. "We know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him" (John 3:2).³ Since Nicodemus presented himself as a disciple, Jesus acted as teacher. And the teacher's first lesson is not what the student asks for but what he needs.

Nicodemus had come with an anxious longing for the Messianic liberation of Israel. But he believed that the new order would be ushered in through human effort and wished to know how he, as a national leader, could hasten its accomplishment.⁴ Jesus challenged his ideas: "I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." He says, if you want your world to

change, first *you* must change. Nicodemus is confused. Be born anew? From above?⁵ What mystery is this?

A complete transformation seems not only impossible to him but unnecessary. After all, Nicodemus considers himself to be sincere, religious, and respected. Can none of his accomplishments be salvaged? If he understands Jesus correctly, he must abandon even his religious beliefs. Did this mean that religious practice, even as faithfully as he observed it, was insufficient to gain entrance into "the kingdom of God"?⁶ Must he admit he is a spiritual embryo rather than a fully developed religious leader? Nicodemus cannot understand Jesus' statement. It seems exaggerated, utopic. After all, every man is a son of his past, of his upbringing and social background. No one can break with everything, and begin again from nothing.

But Jesus insists. Not even the best heritage and the most advantageous religious education can guarantee entrance into the superior realm of reality called "the kingdom of God."

Like Nicodemus we are in fact so far from allowing God to reign unconditionally within us that to do so truly would mean being "born again." However, to be "born from above" is to begin to live fully. We as human beings are not born totally alive. From the moment of birth, we carry deep within us death's seed. To be born from above means to recover our spiritual dimension. It means shedding the thick rind that encloses and limits us, forcing us to see our small world as the only reality. It means discovering that when we connect ourselves to God our human limitations can be surpassed.

Nicodemus feels dizzy. His common sense no longer makes any sense. Struggling to conserve his

point of reference, he rejects Jesus' idea as simplistic and absurd: " 'How can a man be born when he is old?' " (John 3:4). Was Nicodemus old, or did he feel it was too late for him to start anew? His objection comes from the defensive mechanism of a frightened yet honest intellect that needs to test the new ground before stepping onto it.

From his human perspective, Nicodemus cannot understand how God can change a man while respecting his freedom. Jesus will show him that the idea of being born again is less absurd and more guaranteed of success than trying to save oneself by one's own efforts.

Nicodemus doesn't understand that Jesus is not asking the impossible but offering the unimaginable: that the new birth is not something required but rather something offered, for it is impossible to give birth to oneself. In order to be born, one must always depend on another. The new birth experience also resembles that of physical birth since it rarely occurs painlessly.

In the face of Nicodemus' incomprehension, Jesus rephrases the same concept: " 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.' " For a doctor of the Scriptures, the mention of water and spirit (in Hebrew the same word is used for air, wind, breath, and spirit) is a clear allusion to Creation (Genesis 1:1-3). The new birth signifies a new creation; it implies not a human act but a divine one.

Jesus explains. For human beings there are two levels of existence: the "human" and the "spiritual." Each can transmit only the life it possesses. " 'That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.' " The flesh transmits the weak human condition. The Spirit transmits the power of God.

Even with the best of intentions, human aspirations reach no higher than economic well-being, relational satisfaction, or personal glory. Operating at this level, men and women can never hope to become all God has planned them to be. Humanity can only defeat its spiritual impo-

tence with a new birth through God's power—an entering into a new theocentric (God-centered) and not anthropocentric (human-centered) reality.

Surprised by Jesus' language, Nicodemus asks how this change is possible. With slight irony, Jesus pushes him to look for life's meaning outside the bounds of his religious formation: " 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this?' " Nicodemus' speciality was religion, yet somehow he had missed the most elementary lesson; he had not learned that spiritual life depends not upon our knowledge but upon our relationship with God.

" 'Do not marvel,' " Jesus continues, " 'that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' " The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit' " (John 3:7, 8).

This spiritual rebirth changes violent men into apostles of peace. Those consumed by hatred can forgive and love. The mean, self-indulgent egotist is now given to the most generous enterprises. Precise understanding of the regeneration process is unimportant—no one knows how it occurs. The important thing is that it does occur. In a given moment, the power of grace breaks into our lives and transforms us. The new birth cannot be explained. It can only be lived each day.⁸

Nicodemus finally discovers the superficiality of his knowledge of God. He had tried to understand based on his theological framework, but was exceeded by the incredible creativity of God's love. As it is difficult for the materialist to imagine a reality apart from matter, likewise the legalist cannot see a relationship with God outside the bounds of rigid norms. The Pharisee's question expresses his confusion: "How can this be?"

These are his last recorded words during that night encounter. From here on, Nicodemus listens in silence to this unusual teacher who shares the security of His convictions: " 'We speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen' " (John 3:11). Nicodemus' knowledge is based upon tradition and theory. Jesus knows through experience. The doctor knows the letter of the law. Jesus lives its spirit. He leads Nicodemus from surprise to surprise as they sit in the darkness.

The Pharisee looked for a Messiah to rule over Israel. But God is ruler over all humankind. His envoy will be King over all who wish to be born into an endless life in a kingdom of love without boundaries.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). If God loves without barriers and wishes us unlimited happiness, His objective in sending the Messiah could not have



been the judgment Nicodemus and his colleagues expected.⁹ The Son's mission is not to destroy some and save others, but to bring hope to all. Since He wants not pawns but volunteers, His kingdom could not be established by force but only by love. Humanity need only grasp the new life as one mortally wounded accepts the offered cure.

"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:14; see also Numbers 21:4-9). The human race condemned itself to death by separating itself from God, the only source of life. Our only chance of survival is to connect our finiteness with His eternity. In some dangerous births, the only solution is surgical intervention. So we, too, can only see the light through the intervention of the Surgeon "from above."

"He who does what is true comes to the light" (John 3:21). With these words of hope echoing in his ears, Nicodemus leaves.

Nicodemus, the restless intellectual has found more than a teacher. However, though he left forever marked by this disconcerting message, it would take him time to react. His was not a rapid birth but a prolonged labor. He could have become a new man that very night, entering into the service of the gospel. Instead, he continued serving the law.

Nicodemus is the disciple of the night, the one who wanted to be a disciple without appearing to be one. He doubts, not for lack of conviction, but for lack of courage, affected by "what will others think." He fears commitment for he knows it is difficult to be different. He wishes to be born again, but finds it hard to break the fossilized shell of his old self. Until the end, he runs the risk of remaining in the lukewarm group which God will eventually spit out of His mouth (Revelation 3:15,16).

Not until three years later, when the Sanhedrin decide to rid themselves of the revolutionary preacher once and for all that Nicodemus risks Jesus' defense (John 7:50-52). But when he can no longer run from his

conscience and decides to declare himself a follower, Jesus has already been crucified (John 19:38-42).

The light from that secret meeting would shine upon the cross of Calvary, reminding Nicodemus of the enigmatic reference to the tree lifted between heaven and earth to save men and women. Deeply moved, he stands for the crucified Master at a time when even the disciples flee, unbelieving and terrified.

Defying his former leaders and colleagues, the follower of the last hour would ask for the body of Jesus, and as a final tribute to One whom he had followed from afar, he would cover with perfume the wounds that his own cowardice had helped inflict. There, in the face of death, the reality which had cost him such effort to embrace had made of him a newborn person.

NOTES

1. The rabbinical teachings were based upon their faithfulness to the authority of tradition. Rabbi Joseph ben Judah rebukes those who tried to force him "to say something that he had not been told by tried teachers" (*Sukkah* 28a). We can imagine the impact produced by Jesus' teachings among those who held that "he who interprets the Torah in a different way from the traditional will be cursed" (*Sanhedrin* 99a) and that "the true teacher is the one who doesn't take any credit upon himself" (*Pirke Aboth* 6). Jesus surprised His listeners, among other reasons, because "he taught as one who had authority and not as their scribes" (Matthew 7:29; Mark 1:22, RSV). Even the temple guards who were sent to arrest Him returned saying: "'No man ever spoke like this man'" (John 7:46, RSV).

2. Nicodemus is a Greek name formed by *nike* which means "victory" and *demos*, "people." The name reveals a liberal nationalistic spirit since the strict Jews used Hebrew names with theological meaning.

3. Unless otherwise specified, all Bible texts are taken from the Revised Standard Version.

4. The Jewish uprising against the Romans in the years A.D. 66-70 was unleashed by a resistance movement headed by the youthful intellectuals among the Pharisees and Zealots (Josephus, *War*, 2:117). They were convinced that "God would only support their endeavor if man actively cooperated in it" (*Antiquities* 18:5).

5. The word *anōthen* used in the Greek text signifies both.

6. A central theological belief for the Pharisees was that obedience to the law was the only road to salvation, both on the personal and national level: "Great is the Torah which gives to those who practice its commands life in this world and in the world to come" (*Pirke Aboth* 6:7). "The Torah is life...he who possesses its words possesses the future world" (2:8). Even the coming of the Messiah depended upon Israel's completion of the law: "If Israel would obey the law perfectly for only one day, the son of David would come immediately" (*J. Ta'anit* 64a). The obedience required included, along with the biblical laws, those added by tradition: "Awesome are the words of the wise; to transgress them is worse than transgressing the words of the Scriptures" (*Midrash Tannaitic*; Deut. 17:11).

7. For this reason Jesus can say that "the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21, NIV).

8. Jesus also refers to the symbolism of baptism. Behind the visible symbol (water) is the invisible (the Spirit). The immersion of the believer in the water symbolizes his death to his past life, and his breathing again upon his reappearance out of the water symbolizes the living breath of the Spirit which fills the new life. The importance is not found in the ritual of the water but in the spiritual reality that allows a person to commune with God.

9. Based upon the prophecy given in Daniel 7, it was believed the Messiah's mission would be the liberation of Israel and the judgment of the nations, beginning with Rome (*'Aboda Zara* 2a, b).

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