

ENCOUNTERING JESUS

Nicodemus

John 3:1-15

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McBIC's goal—every time we meet—is that people would encounter Jesus. Wherever people might be in their spiritual journey, whatever might be happening in their lives, our hope is that people will connect with Jesus—that they'll leave here knowing they've met with Him.

The Bible is filled with encounters people had with God—Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Noah, Moses, King David and others in the Old Testament met with or heard from God. And in the New Testament people like Mary and Joseph, Zechariah and Elizabeth, the shepherds and the wise men heard from God. And after Jesus was born people had the opportunity to encounter God in the flesh as they interacted with Jesus.

One of the things I love most in the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—are the written accounts of people's encounters with Jesus. There are dozens of amazing exchanges people from all walks of life had with Jesus. The variety of these encounters is important because our tendency is to assume everyone else interacts with Jesus in the same way we do. But we all encounter Jesus differently and to remind us of that I've asked a group of McBIC'ers of all ages to share 1 sentence with us about how they began their relationship with Jesus...

Jesus meets us wherever we are. I'm going to repeat that statement, because it's crucial that each of us understands this truth: **Jesus meets us wherever we are.** None of us is excluded. We don't grow too old or sin too much or miss too many opportunities so that Jesus gives up on us. He meets us where we are.

In planning this series our staff settled **on two goals...** First, as we explore encounters Jesus had with people **our hope is that each of us will better understand how Jesus ministers to us.** Jesus meets us at our point of need. And secondly, **we want each of us to learn how we can minister Jesus' love to others.** If we're followers of Jesus his Holy Spirit lives inside us and his primary plan for people to encounter Him is that they would experience his love and grace

and hope through us. Exploring Jesus' encounters with people can teach us how we can best share his love and truth with others.

Many of Jesus' encounters with people stemmed from their obvious physical, emotional or spiritual needs. Jesus ministered physical healing to some; He delivered others from demonic oppression; and, others who were troubled emotionally experienced wholeness. But the first encounter we're going to explore in this series was primarily intellectual in nature (at least that's the way it was presented to Jesus) and I think that's fitting for us, because many of us struggle intellectually with doubts and unanswered questions about our faith. We're such rational, logical people that it's hard for us to make the leap to accept spiritual truth.

John chapter 3 verses 1 & 2 introduce us to a man named Nicodemus...

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." John 3:1 & 2

We might read over those details quickly without a lot of thought, but they're loaded with important information. Nicodemus was a Pharisee—and not just any Pharisee—he was a leader among the Pharisees, a member of the Jewish ruling council. Nicodemus was a respected teacher of the people—someone people looked to for answers to their spiritual questions.

The Pharisees are often presented in the Gospels as Jesus' rivals, because they were frequently in conflict with Jesus—they challenged Jesus' interpretations of God's law as it had been given to Moses and they repeatedly countered Jesus' claim that He was God's Son. The Pharisees have a poor reputation because of their run-ins with Jesus, but they weren't bad people. The Pharisees were held in great respect for their knowledge of the Scriptures and the integrity with which they lived their lives. They were the religious conservatives of the day. They took God's Word seriously and tried their best to live according to the Scriptures and to see that others lived lives that were consistent with the Scriptures.

We also learn from these verses that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. It's safe to assume they didn't meet at night because Jesus and Nicodemus being unable to arrange their busy schedules for a day-time meeting. Nicodemus came at night because he didn't want his visit to become public. It wouldn't have been fitting for a Pharisee to be seen with Jesus.

Nicodemus came to Jesus and said, *“We know you come from God, because no one could teach like you do if they weren’t from God.”* Nicodemus’ statement isn’t completely truthful. He stated his personal opinion, not the widespread belief of the Pharisees. The Pharisees didn’t believe Jesus was God’s Son. In fact, they argued that Jesus came from anywhere but God.

Nicodemus came to Jesus with the basic question, *“Who are you?”* This wasn’t a question you’d expect to hear from a Pharisee. The Pharisees and other religious leaders knew who Jesus was—at least they claimed they did. Jesus was a heretic, a charlatan, possibly even sent by Satan to deceive the Jews and draw people away from their faith. They knew Jesus wasn’t what He claimed—the Son of God.

I’ll pick up reading about Nicodemus’ encounter with Jesus at verse 3...

Jesus replied, *“Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”* *“How can someone be born when they are old?”* Nicodemus asked. *“Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”* John 3:3 & 4

Jesus’ statement, *“no one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again”* is familiar to many of us. *“Born again”* is kind of a catch phrase for us that speaks of life in Christ and our relationship with Jesus. Our familiarity with the phrase causes us to miss its oddness. Nicodemus responds with a straight forward child-like response. *“How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”*

Being born into the right family was of special importance to Jewish people. Many Jews could trace their ancestry back hundreds of years—all the way to Abraham. Jesus points out that being born of God is more important than tracing our human lineage. Jesus is sharing spiritual insights, but Nicodemus gets tripped up over the literal picture of an adult climbing back into his mother’s womb and being born a second time. I’ll continue reading at verse 5...

Jesus answered, *“Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”*

“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked. John 3:5-9

Like many of us, Nicodemus struggled with what Jesus said, because he was trying to understand spiritual truth from a strictly physical/material point of view. So, Jesus pointed out to him that his truth is both spiritual and physical. ***“No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the spirit.”*** The concept of being baptized in water and in the spirit is one that John mentions several times in his Gospel. It’s his way of capturing the spiritual and material aspects of life in Jesus. Baptism is a physical act. Baptism as administered by John the Baptist was a sign of repentance and the imagery around baptism points to the cleansing that water brings. Later the Apostle Paul compared baptism with resurrection to new life. A recent convert goes into the water as a sign of death and comes out of the water as a symbol of new life, just as a body is buried under the ground and will be raised to life through Jesus. Water baptism is a physical symbol of the spiritual work God has done in a person’s life. Jesus refers to that spiritual life as being born of the Spirit. Water baptism and being baptized with Jesus’ Spirit go hand in hand.

Bible scholar, N.T. Wright, points out that no one in the early church would have claimed, *“I’ve been baptized in the Spirit, so I don’t need water baptism.”* Water baptism was the physical sign that one had become a part of Jesus’ Church. On the flip side, at times people claim, *“I’ve been baptized in water, so I’m saved.”* In his first letter to the Corinthian Church the Apostle Paul addresses that misconception and informs his readers that performing Christian deeds has to go hand in hand with the work God has done in our hearts. God moves in our lives spiritually and we make a physical response.

To help explain the Spirit Jesus draws an analogy with something everyone is familiar with—the wind. The wind blows where it pleases. We hear its sound and we feel it, but we don’t know where it comes from or where it’s headed. Granted, today we know more about wind than people did in Jesus’ time, but it’s still a mystery. Wind has physical properties, but it’s also very much a mystery. Followers of Jesus are born of water and of the Spirit. Water and the Spirit complement each other.

Nicodemus isn’t getting it and asks the question, *“How can this be?”* And Jesus responds with these words—in verses 10-15:

“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, *“and do you not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our*

testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” John 3:10-15

Jesus goads Nicodemus by pointing out that he is Israel’s teacher and yet he doesn’t understand these essential truths. Jesus goes on to tell Nicodemus that He knows what He is talking about because He is God’s son. Jesus’ answer to Nicodemus’ presenting question, “*Who are you?*” is “*I’m the Son of Man, God’s son.*” And then Jesus reached back into a story from the Old Testament with which Nicodemus would have been very familiar. The story is found in Numbers chapter 21.



The Israelites were being led through the wilderness to the Promised Land by Moses and as they have many times, they complained against Moses and against God. God responded by sending poisonous snakes among the people and many who were bitten began to die. When the Israelites realized what was happening, they confessed their sin to Moses and asked him to pray to God for them. Moses prayed and God instructed him to make a snake and put it on a pole with the promise that whoever was bitten and looked at the snake would be spared.

Jesus points back to this story and says, *“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”*

So, what happened to Nicodemus? His encounter with Jesus ends abruptly and John’s Gospel goes immediately into some teaching with the well known verses John 3:16 & 17—*“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son...”* Nicodemus disappears from the story as silently as he came to Jesus—probably just the way he wanted it. But it appears that this night-time encounter with Jesus had a profound effect on him. John mentions him two more times in his Gospel. In John chapter 7 the chief priests and religious leaders were discussing having Jesus arrested. In the midst of their discussion Nicodemus asked, *“Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?”* The Jewish leaders responded, *“Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.”*

In John’s Gospel chapter 19, following Jesus’ crucifixion we read these words, Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate’s permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus’ body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. John 19:38-42

Nicodemus became a follower of Jesus. He boldly stood up to his fellow Jewish leaders when they were intent on arresting Jesus, asking them what He had done that warranted arrest. And after Jesus was crucified he courageously prepared Jesus for his burial. We don’t know the details of Nicodemus’ faith journey, but his night time encounter with Jesus led him to become a follower of Jesus Christ.

I chose to begin this series with Nicodemus’ encounter of Jesus, because my experience tells me that **Many of us**—before we embrace faith in Jesus and even after we’ve begun a relationship with Him—**struggle intellectually with the spiritual nature of our relationship with Jesus**. We’re accustomed to thinking things through—rationalizing, deducing and reasoning our way to answers and solutions. It’s not uncommon when I’m discussing faith with someone who

hasn't committed themselves to following Jesus to hear them say, *"I don't yet have the faith to believe and I'm not sure how I can get it."* Understanding that believing is an obstacle for many people, those of us who know Jesus often shy away from sharing our faith because we don't think we know enough, and we doubt we'll be able to answer the questions people might throw at us.

Jesus' response to Nicodemus is instructive, both for those who are wrestling with intellectual questions and for those of us who feel inadequately prepared to answer intellectual objections. Nicodemus approached Jesus with an intellectual question, but Jesus responded with a spiritual truth that transcended his mind and required his faith. Jesus, as we'll see in other encounters He had with people, was the master re-director. Nicodemus came asking Jesus, *"Who are you?"* and Jesus responded with words about birth and with a story about snakes from the Old Testament. Jesus knew that intellectual questions often bely physical, emotional, relational and spiritual needs. A helpful insight for us to keep in mind as we interact with people who don't know Jesus is that their real need often lies deeper than their initial question.

As we move to our time of response this morning, I want to speak to those of us here this morning who are wrestling with intellectual questions related to faith in Jesus. I'm sure there are people here this morning who have professed faith in Jesus, but find themselves struggling with doubt. And I'm confident there are others here today who haven't take the step of accepting Jesus as their Savior, who are grappling with intellectual questions. A good question to ask yourself is, ***"What's my true need? Is there something else behind my intellectual questions?"*** I encourage you to look closely at Jesus' response to Nicodemus. He welcomed him and He was patient and receptive, but He also prodded him. He wasn't content to allow Nicodemus to hide behind intellectual questions. And Nicodemus—in his own time—responded by placing his faith in Jesus and becoming his follower. He took tangible steps—defending Jesus in front of his colleagues and later assisting Joseph of Arimathea in Jesus' burial. My challenge for us if we're struggling with faith is to take tangible, physical steps of response. As God moves in our heart, He asks us to respond physically.