

4 addresses on Bible Characters

Part 3

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[00:00:00] I want to read my scripture now, John's Gospel, Chapter 2.

John, Chapter 2, beginning at verse 23 and on into Chapter 3.

Now when Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Passover, in the feast day, many believed in his name when they saw the miracles which he did. But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, and needed not that [00:01:06] any should testify of man, for he knew what was in man. But there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God, for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. 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? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born of water and of [00:02:03] the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth. So is every one that is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?

Now in chapter 7, beginning at verse 50, Nicodemus saith unto them, He that came to Jesus by [00:03:03] night being one of them, Doth our Lord judge any man before it hear him, and know what he doeth?

They answered and said unto him, Art thou also of Galilee?

Search and look, for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet.

Now chapter 19, beginning at verse 38, after the record of the crucifixion and death of the Lord Jesus, we read in verse 38, After this, Joseph of Arimathea, 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.

[00:04:01] 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 an hundred pound weight. Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury.

Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus therefore, because of the Jews preparation day, for the sepulchre was nigh at hand.

The Lord will, we hope to make some comment on those verses, but before that we will sing hymn 137.

[00:05:02] A ruler once came to Jesus by night, to ask him the way of salvation and light. The master made answer in words true and plain, ye must be born again.

Hymn 137.

Last night some of us began a series of studies on bible characters, and we looked for a little at what the bible says about a lady with the grand name Lydia.

But tonight, to be open handed, we are going to look at what the bible says about a man, in this case called Nicodemus.

But first of all, there is someone far more important to think about than Nicodemus, and [00:06:05] that's the Lord Jesus.

It would be no gospel message unless we start and end and concentrate upon the wonderful person that Jesus, the son of God is, the way he's loved us, and the way he gave himself for our sins.

Now that will come out as we think about this man called Nicodemus.

I suppose Nicodemus is a picture of many people that are here tonight, outwardly nice, respectable, clean, religious perhaps, outwardly everything that anybody that's sensible and fair-minded [00:07:10] could demand.

But again, before we get to Nicodemus, let us see what the preliminary verses have to say. It said Jesus was in Jerusalem at about Passover time.

Now for about 1,500 years, the nation of Israel had made a special point of gathering together at that time of year in order to celebrate the Passover.

And when they celebrated the Passover, year by year, they were celebrating the fact that [00:08:01] the nation had been in slavery in a foreign country that they didn't belong to, and for a long, long time they were slaves in Egypt, and they were governed by a tyrant who had the title of Pharaoh, and to use the term, they were in bondage in slavery to Pharaoh.

And then, mercifully, God, by an act of God, delivered them out of the slavery in Egypt and liberated them, and they went over the Red Sea, into the wilderness, and then a long, long time later, about 40 years later, they eventually got into the promised land that God had always had in mind for them.

And thoughts about slavery, thoughts about the goodness of God, thoughts of regret, no [00:09:06] doubt, as to why they'd been in slavery in the first place as a nation, all these mixed feelings would be going through their mind. I suppose annual events, birthday celebrations, milestones of one sort or another, tend to bring mixed feelings, don't they? Holiday times, Christmas, New Year.

For instance, in my own family, my mother was always sad, always subdued, always quiet about Christmas time and New Year, because over a period of 18 months, she lost her mother, her favourite brother, and her husband, all about holiday time, and forever after that, she had mixed feelings about holiday times. [00:10:03] Well, I'm sure the people of Israel, or that part of them who became known as the Jews, they had mixed feelings at Passover time, thankful that they'd been liberated from that bondage, and yet still knowing something of the same feeling, because their land at the time was occupied by the Roman Empire, and they still didn't have full liberty, they couldn't always please themselves.

And the Lord Jesus, born into that nation to offer himself as the long-promised Messiah of the nation, one might think that he would have high expectations that in response to all the Old Testament prophecies, that he would be highly expecting that he would be [00:11:05] received with great acclaim, and that all the Jews would get together and say, this is it, now Jesus is here, we can have a king of our own.

But this is the Gospel that tells us again and again, and we read the words, that Jesus knew, Jesus knew, Jesus knew, he knew everything that was going on, he knew every thought that was in every mind, he knew to what extent every conscience was disturbed, because this is the Gospel that tells us that the Lord Jesus who came to die for us because he loves us, that he is really in his person, he is God, and God's omniscient, God knows all things.

So several times in this Gospel we read that he knew all things. [00:12:05] Oh, it's still true, God, the Lord Jesus who is God, alive in heaven now, he knows each of us better than we know ourselves.

Things that we wouldn't dare tell our best friends, never mind our worst enemies, he knows.

He knows us through and through. He's not deceived by anything on the outer surface, he knows us through and through. And he knew all men, and he wasn't deceived by anything on the outer surface. The Bible tells us, doesn't it, that man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh upon the heart.

And we are told, as we read, that the Lord Jesus didn't commit himself to any temporary [00:13:03] movement amongst the people that seemed to be moving in his direction. It says he knew all men, he wasn't deceived. He knows you and me as we sit here, he knows that while we might appear to be attentive, we know where John's Gospel is, we know that Nicodemus is spoken of in three chapters, chapters 3, 7 and 19, yes, he knows we know that, but he looks upon the heart and he knows our condition of soul, whether our sins have been forgiven or whether they are outstanding against us.

And then we read, but there was a man who was interested enough, a bit shy, and a bit reserved, but it says he was interested enough to come to see the Lord Jesus.

But it says significantly, it says he came by night.

[00:14:07] Well you've come here by night, and it's dark. Is there anybody you know, relation, friend, workmate, school friend, anybody that you know and knows you, is there anyone you can think of, about whom you would be ashamed or embarrassed if they knew that on a Sunday night you are sitting here in the Gospel message? Well if you do feel like that, that's apparently how Nicodemus felt the first time he came to the Lord Jesus. It says he came by night.

Famous evangelists many, many years ago have equated the three visits that Nicodemus came [00:15:03] into contact with the Lord Jesus under three kinds of light. They say first of all he came at midnight, then they say in chapter 7 he was in the twilight, and then in chapter 19 he comes right out into broad daylight. The purpose of a Gospel meeting is that you're not a secret disciple, as was said of Joseph of Arimathea, but that you're prepared to let anybody know that's prepared to listen, I believe that Jesus loves me, that he died for my sins, and that I'm going to heaven to meet him someday, and it's my hope that he's coming for me soon. Now if we are prepared to say that to anyone that's prepared to listen, we're already in the broad daylight, amen to that.

If you're still a secret disciple, you don't mind coming to the Gospel meeting, it's light [00:16:04] and it's warm and some of your friends come, but there's people that you respect and would like to respect you, well you're not sure whether you'd like them to know or not. Maybe you're still like Nicodemus, that you're in the blackness of night as far as your soul is concerned. Now, what was Nicodemus like?

Socially, and I suppose in natural life, he was a nobleman.

He was one of the rulers, we learn, a ruler of the Jews.

He was in the top brass. If there was a banquet, he sat at the top table. If there was a conference, he was one of the invited speakers. Everybody looked up to him and said, oh yes, Lord Nicodemus, there he is, and they would bask in his reflected glory if they were a friend of his.

[00:17:06] Personally, well, we read he was a Pharisee.

He was in that special elite sect where it would appear that the most important thing in their role in life was to tell other people what to do. Oh, it's easy to tell other people what to do, isn't it? Some people perhaps, some of us perhaps, might think we are in a position to tell other people what to do and we may consider that to be more important than doing the right thing ourselves. Now, you couldn't quite make that accusation against Nicodemus because he was a respected member of the council, the Sanhedrin, this body, this group who ruled the Jews in their religious activities and he was looked up to and he was a good example. [00:18:02] Now let me tell you about the nation of Israel, God's lesson book to the world.

When you get time, all that tremendous spare time you have and you don't know how to fill it in, read Isaiah chapter 5, read the second half of Matthew 21 and there we learn God's lesson book, that God gave special favours to the nation of Israel, he brought them into being, he gave them every favour and privilege, he hedged them about and he protected them and he put them in the best part of the world, the hub of the universe, certainly the hub of the world as it will be seen to be one day, and they were God's lesson book and he gave them the best brains of any nation in the world, no surprise to me that if you [00:19:05] look at most of the nations in the world that like Jacob, they've been clever enough and they've schemed enough and they've planned enough to get right at the top of the

government in many nations of the world, they are equipped to yield, I'm not a Zionist.

The Lord Jesus singled out one of the best of that nation, Nicodemus by name, so you have one of the prime examples of the best nation in the world, nationally and naturally speaking and the Lord Jesus says to him, you're not good enough for God. Now the lesson for me and you is that if God says to one of the prime examples of the best nation in the world, you're not good enough, it applies to all that nation and it applies [00:20:06] to everybody in every nation that there's ever been. If the Lord Jesus had singled out a nondescript like you or me and said, you're not good enough for God, people would have said, so what? But taking this good, respectable, religious man and saying to him, you're not good enough, it means that nobody is, or we see the wisdom of the Son of God and taking one of the best of men and saying, now for you, you need a new start.

In the prayer meeting before the gospel, without knowing what the subject was, I was very pleased to hear one of the Christians present that something that would be said that would cause someone present to be able to begin a new life with God.

[00:21:01] Now that was what the Lord Jesus said to Nicodemus. He says, all you've done, all you are, it's not good enough for God, you've got to start again.

Nicodemus, for our benefit as much as his own, he misunderstood what the Lord Jesus said. He said, how can I make a new start?

He said, I'm a mature man.

He says, how can you compress my body into the body of a little baby and how that I can start again, draw my first breath and make a new start in that way? Or the Bible teaches in many other parts, that would be no good anyway. I don't know about you, but by experience and observation, it seems to me that if I have a tendency to go wrong in a certain direction, and I'm bound to, if you said, right, let's [00:22:08] wipe the slate clean, start again, make a new start and go back to square one and in the light of your previous experience, start again. The Bible tells me, my experience of life, my observation of others tells me that if you did that to me or any of you, I would go twice as far in the wrong direction at twice the speed that I did before.

The disaster would be compounded. But the Lord Jesus wasn't saying that. He says, the way you've gone, showing that in your heart you're not right with God, the necessity of a new beginning is not a natural beginning, it's a spiritual beginning [00:23:02] you need.

You need to start again, or in the graphic way that the Lord Jesus put it, ye must be born again.

You Bible students, I don't know if you agree with me, new birth is a difficult subject to talk about because new birth is not a matter of exaltation.

You had nothing to do with your original natural birth.

You've lived your natural life which began with a natural birth and you are as incapable of making a new spiritual start as you were originally incapable of making a natural start in life.

So what's the point? Oh, it may well be that with any of us, while we can't cause ourselves to be born

again, [00:24:08] that maybe that the realization that we are not good enough for God in our own natural state, it may produce in us a sense of need which God can use and bring about new birth within us by the Word of God. Well, we'll leave that for the moment and we'll come back to Nicodemus. He came to Jesus by night.

His puzzlement, his lack of full understanding, gave the Lord Jesus the opportunity to say to him, to all Jews everywhere, to every man and woman, boy and girl, that's ever been born into the world, in yourself you're not good enough for God. The proof is in the Gospel message. If you could work your own salvation, it wouldn't have been necessary for Jesus to come from [00:25:05] heaven into the world to die at Calvary that your sins might be forgiven.

If I ask you, are you alive?

You may well say, yes, I can tell there are things that my senses appreciate. I can feel things, I can touch them, I can smell them, I can see them, I can hear them. Yes, of course I am alive.

Or similarly, when you've been given spiritual life, you are aware of it.

God grants you a special sense that your sins are forgiven, you're on your way to heaven, and you have interests and aspects of life in the spiritual sense that you were completely [00:26:02] disinterested in before.

Well the Lord said to Nicodemus, he says, there are many things about it that men can never understand and never will.

Can't tell where it comes from, like the wind, or where it goes to, but you can see the result. And the Lord said to Nicodemus, ye must be born again. Now whether we say that we leave him there in a fog, or we leave him there in the blackness of the midnight hour, we move on to chapter 7.

Nicodemus, being an influential man, was called to a meeting of the council who were completely puzzled as to what to do about the Lord Jesus.

They wondered how the coming of Jesus into their civilisation, into the precincts of [00:27:05] their temple, how would it affect their sphere of influence?

How would it affect their reputation?

And to some extent, how would it affect their livelihood? Lots of commercial activities, whether they got 2%, 5% or 10% cut, it's not for me to say. But they had an interest, they had, if you like, a social interest, they had a political interest and they had a financial interest in what went on there under their control. But they had a council meeting to say, now, this man's upsetting the apple cart, he's putting the cat among the pigeons, what are we going to do about him? And this man, Nicodemus, who'd gone to see Jesus, maybe midnight, but certainly in the [00:28:06] hours of darkness, somewhere between 6pm and 6am as we speak of it, he was prepared at that stage to make public his sympathy and his understanding of the need to be completely fair. Didn't work out like that, as we'll see. But he was prepared to stand up and be counted and say, now look, let's give the man a fair hearing, let's see what he has to say.

If anyone said to you, are you a Christian?

Are you one of these religious nuts? Are you a Bible puncher?

Would you be embarrassed into making some vague remark and say, well, I think we have [00:29:04] lessons to learn and I think he was a good example? Or would you say, he's my saviour and I love him and I'm going to meet him, he's coming for me?

Well, in this midway point, and we don't dwell on it, Nicodemus says, now look, come on, let's be fair.

The time comes when you have to jump off the fence where you'd rather be balanced, neither one thing nor the other, and you've got to be prepared to say, yes, I believe.

I'm very grateful that at the age of two and a half, I was sent to a good, traditional, orthodox Bible teaching Sunday school.

And from that bright age of two and a half, I've been content to believe that the Bible [00:30:08] is God's word, that Jesus is the son of God, and that he loves me and he died on the cross to save me from the penalty of my sins. There are some people about that age or slightly older here tonight, I would never underestimate the intelligence, the understanding of a boy or a girl.

All my body's changed, I've aged a lot since those early days. As far as I can tell, I don't think any differently now to what I did then. Well, some of my friends might say it shows how underdeveloped you are, you've made no progress at all since you were two and a half, but I'm sure most of you know what [00:31:02] I mean.

Adults gossip, they talk about people, they talk about things, you're playing with your toys or you're writing or sketching, and they think you don't know what they're talking about, but you do, don't you? You know exactly what they're talking about, you know the implications, and you know right from wrong.

Many of you have gone through that, many of you, perhaps boys and girls, still at that position.

I'm grateful that I've never had any doubt that this is God's Word to me and that deep down I knew I was a sinner, little as I was, I did things I shouldn't have done, I thought things I shouldn't have thought, and occasionally even I said things I shouldn't have said. And I knew exactly what the Bible meant when it says you're a sinner, and if you don't [00:32:06] trust Jesus as your saviour, you don't believe that when he died on the cross that it was for you, you'll go to hell, I knew all about that from two and a half onwards. What was years after that, before I came out openly in broad daylight and said, I believe.

Are you still a secret disciple that's never come clean, like Nicodemus was at midnight? Are you still in the twilight of wanting to appear fair and reasonable, but still sitting on the fence, betwixt and between, as the Bible says, halting between two opinions? Or has there ever been a moment when you've told your mother, your father, your brother, your sister, your grandparents, your grandchildren, whoever was prepared to listen, I want you [00:33:05] to know that my sins are forgiven because I trust Jesus.

He was a secret disciple previously, but it had got to the pitch where Joseph of Aramia, Matthias said, it's time to stand up and be counted. And he went to Pilate and he begged the body of Jesus.

John's gospel is the gospel of threes, because God is at work, and three times in quick succession we read the body of Jesus, the body of Jesus, the body of Jesus. Why does he say that? Why does John say that? It's to emphasize that Jesus really died.

He didn't go into a trance.

He wasn't secreted away by his disciples.

[00:34:05] No one manipulated circumstances to confuse people. The body was lying there because Jesus really died. I need to know that. Unless he really died, I cannot be sure that my sins are forgiven.

And this secret disciple came out into the broad daylight and Nicodemus said, well, if that's good enough for Joseph of Aramathia, it's good enough for me. Not now in the darkness of midnight, not in that funny obscure period that none of us like driving in, twilight, neither one thing nor the other, but in broad daylight Nicodemus said, that goes for me as well.

If you've never told anybody in public, if you've never actually confessed Christ [00:35:03] as saviour, if you've never actually said to someone, yes, I believe the Christian gospel, I know that Jesus loves me and gave himself for me, are you prepared to do what Joseph of Aramathia did and Nicodemus said and say, that's what I mean. I'm totally committed, I'm for Jesus. He loved me, he gave himself for me and now I'm going to stand by him and stand for him in the world that crucified him.

An early book after this one says, if thou shalt confess with the mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. [00:36:05] Not perhaps you'll be encouraged to live a better life, maybe, but that's not the vital point. It doesn't say if you do the best you can, you might get to heaven in the end because God's a loving God.

It says if you believe in your heart that he died for you and rose again and you're prepared to tell someone about it in words, openly, yes, I believe that Jesus died for me. It's the Bible God's word that says, when you do that, you're saved. The matter's settled, heaven is assured, your sins are gone forever. Isn't it worthwhile just to take that little step and say, yes, I believe that. You know, God knows, and the people that would be listening would know, if you just said, [00:37:01] I believe, I trust the Saviour, I'm glad that he loves me and gave himself for me and with his help I'm going to live for him as long as I'm left here on earth. What the first move the Bible says is to confess the name of Jesus as Lord.

This was said on one occasion a few years ago, they sang the last hymn and then the preacher commended them to the Lord in prayer and then as soon as the meeting was finished, a young man was seen, while everybody was gossiping and seeing their friends in the normal way, a young man was seen to walk about the hall, he stopped at every group, he had just a little word with them and they smiled and they shook hands with him, then he went to another group and it turned out that he'd put into practice what the preacher said. [00:38:05] He went to the first group and said, I just want you to know that I believe that Jesus died for me on the cross and my sins are forgiven and I'm going to heaven because Jesus is my Saviour.

He went to another group and he said the same thing and he went to another group and he said the same thing. What was happening? He was confessing Jesus as Lord. Oh, there are other ways of doing it, but that young man understood that if he believed in the heart that part of the outlet for that, part of the way of showing that he really meant it was that he was prepared to tell somebody and in fact he told everybody that was in that gospel meeting that night that he'd decided that having believed, he'd been believing some time, but he knew that the joy of salvation would be his if he told [00:39:07] someone that he was a believer on the Lord Jesus Christ. Now we're going to sing a closing hymn. Think about what I've said.

The age spread here, oh I would say, is at least perhaps, I don't know, 75 years perhaps between the youngest and the oldest, but the gospel message is plain to us all. We need to believe in the heart and confess with the mouth and if we do believe and we are not sure if we've confessed, take the opportunity to tell somebody, somebody that you know, somebody that you love, that you believe that Jesus died for you and that he's your saviour and joy will fill your soul. Now the last hymn is number 70. [00:40:02] When we believe, when we confess, there's still a lot we don't know and we feel very much like the words of this hymn. I am not skilled to understand what God hath willed, what God hath planned. I only know at his right hand stands one who is my saviour.

We'll sing the whole hymn, number 70. I am not skilled to understand what God hath willed, what God hath planned.

I only know at his right hand stands one who is my saviour.

I take him at his word indeed, Christ died for sin, as this I did.

[00:41:01] And in my heart I find a need of him to be my saviour.

That he should leave his grace on high.