

Encounters with Jesus I - Nicodemus at Night

I can't say I was surprised when they kicked me off the ruling council. I really can't. I hoped it wouldn't come to that, but I sort of expected that it might. It's a long story though. Are you sure you want to hear it?

Alright, well, here's how it went down. It was basically like any other year, right? Day after day it was the same kind of thing. A man would come to us about how his neighbor had planted something in his field. A husband would come to us wanting permission to divorce his wife. You know, normal stuff. And then there were the more interesting cases—boy could it get intense when all 70 of us were gathered together to argue about one point of law or another. Our main goal was to keep the peace among the people, to make sure that we were still walking according to the laws that our fathers laid down, and to keep people prepared for and awaiting the Messiah.

Oh, you don't know about the Messiah? Well, there are old prophecies, you see, in the old books, that talk about the rescue of Israel from its oppressors. We had been waiting for more than 400 years for this Messiah to come. We were expecting that he would come any day to free us from the Roman oppressors and give us back our own land again. We were always on the lookout for who it would be. But many days it seemed like the Messiah would never come, that he would never hear the cries of his people and come to rescue us.

Anyway, we started hearing these rumblings about a man named Jesus. He was stirring up a lot of conversation. Even when we were informally gathered, not holding council meetings, Jesus's name came up. We heard claims that he had turned water into wine at a wedding feast. Crazy, right? I mean, why would anyone even do that? Then there was this guy, a prophet named John, and he actually claimed that this Jesus was the Son of God! Can you believe it?

Others said that he healed the sick. They also claimed that he could cast out demons. But what really got people upset was when Jesus came to the temple during Passover. Instead of celebrating with the rest of the community, something happened to make him angry. Someone told me his face turned beet red, and he actually shouted. He knocked over tables in the temple marketplace, and he made a whip and drove all the merchants from the temple courts. Can you believe that? I mean, who did he think he was? We'd been selling things in the temple courts for hundreds of years. Why should we change that now? At least that's what my colleagues thought. We talked about that little incident for days. Some were saying even then that Jesus should be restrained and prevented from speaking. But others spoke out and said that he couldn't be performing the miraculous signs that he was unless he came from God.

So anyway, all this talk made me kind of intrigued. I'm not one to rock the boat normally, but in this case, I thought it at least bore out investigating. Why not just go to Jesus and have a conversation with him? Just to see what he was saying. People had told me that he said such strange things. I guess I just wanted to see for myself.

I have to admit, though, I was a little bit nervous. The Council is powerful, and I really didn't want to cross anyone. But I just had to go and see him. So one night when Jesus was nearby, I went and found him after dark. Our conversation went like this:

"Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."†

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?" I asked. "Surely they cannot return a second time to their mother's womb to be born!"†

"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 by my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it came from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."†

At this point, I was really confused. "How can this be?"† I asked.

Jesus seemed shocked. He said, "You are Israel's teacher, 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 told you about 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, [so that everyone who believes in him may have life with the Eternal One through him.]"†

And then he turned and walked away. And I just sat down on a tree stump and thought for a long time. Those people must have been right, when they said that John the Baptizer called him the Son of God. Now Jesus had called himself the Son of Man—to me—to my face. Did he know what he was doing? Claiming to be the Messiah, the one who would rescue Israel? The one that we had been waiting for for hundreds of years? And he made that claim in front me—one of the members of the ruling council!

If it wasn't true, if it couldn't be verified, then he could be put to death under our laws for blasphemy. And yet he seemed unconcerned about that; he was only shocked that I didn't already know who he was.

I shook my head, and I thought some more. I thought again about all the stories of him healing people and rescuing them from demons. It's not really possible to do that without God being with him. So when I went back to the council the next day, I went to our records of the old writings. I spent days poring over them. And I began to think that we might have been wrong about what we expected the Messiah to be.

But it was only much later, after Jesus was put to death, that I fully understood how wrong we'd been. It was his reference to the snake in the wilderness that made it clear that his death was part of the plan all along. After I'd paid my respects and given a burial gift, I looked back at that story in our book of Numbers about the serpent in the desert. It was one of the many times my people spoke about God and complained against him, claiming that he was not taking care of them. So then snakes came and were biting and poisoning people, and the people called out to God to save them.

So God told Moses to make a bronze snake and lift it up, and that anyone who looked at the snake would live. By telling me that story, it seemed like maybe Jesus was trying to prepare me for the fact that he really was different than we expected him to be. He was trying to prepare me for the fact that he would die in the way that he did, and that his death would be the remedy to the brokenness we experience.

You see, we'd all expected that he would come in military strength and power. We'd

expected that he would lead a military campaign and crush the Roman oppressors. We'd even celebrated him as the Messiah when he rode into the city on a donkey shortly before the Passover that year. We thought that deliverance was near.

After his death though, we were heartbroken. I got close enough to the disciples during that time to know that they were feeling just as disappointed and lost as I was. They didn't always understand what Jesus was talking about, but they had placed their faith in him. They trusted that he was going to rescue us. None of us expected him to die.

But then he rose again, and everything changed. Before that, I really did believe that he came from God. But it was only after he arose and appeared to his disciples that I understood that he was the true Messiah. I finally understood that he expected to free us not from the bonds of Roman oppression, but from the bonds of our own brokenness and our inability to really love God and love other people. I saw it time and time again, as one of the rulers of the council. Every day, people were breaking the law and fighting and bickering and hurting one another. We were not able to live up to the ideal—to the perfection that was laid out for us in the Torah, our book of holy writings.

But when I put my faith in Jesus, something changed. It's not that I was perfect. But I was able to walk with God in a different way. I was able to trust him to make me clean, and I could walk with him, the Eternal One. I didn't have to worry about keeping the law anymore—I didn't have to work to make myself perfect to approach God. All I had to do was to let go of my own way of doing things and allow him to lead me and help me to walk according to the principles Jesus taught. He has made it possible for me to live within the abundant life that he taught about.

And that's when I got kicked out of the council. Because most of the Jews didn't believe that Jesus is the Messiah. They're still waiting for someone to rescue us politically. And I just couldn't keep my mouth shut about how that was not what God had intended at all.

What Jesus said about the spirit and being born again was right! I am a whole new man. And I wanted to tell other people about the change in my life. So that's what I'm doing now. I'm just a poor man, with no status and no power. But I am a happy man. I am content with my life. And in my old age, I have found what it means to walk with the Eternal One.

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† Quotations taken from John 3

You can read Nicodemus's story in John 3. The portions that are not quoted from the Bible are a fictionalized account of Nicodemus based on the Bible and commentaries that interpret and explain his story.

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Discussion Questions

- What did you notice about this story?
- What did you wonder about?

- What have you heard about Jesus?
- What expectations do you have about who he is or what he does in a person's life?
- Where did these expectations come from?
- Do you think that they are right or wrong?

- What has the church told you about Jesus?
- What do you think the church is getting wrong about Jesus?
- Do you think the Bible is trustworthy?
- If not, where else can you look for information about Jesus?

- Do you know anyone who knows Jesus?
- What questions do you have for them?
- What do you think life with the eternal one looks like?
- How would you find that life? How would you start it?
- Jesus referred to being born of the Spirit. What do you think that means?
- How do you think that a life lived with the eternal one would be similar to the life you're living right now?
- How might it be different?

What questions do you have for Jesus? Write or draw them below.