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Tozer

"But real seekers after truth are almost as rare as albino deer. And here is why: Truth is a glorious but hard master. It makes moral demands upon us. It claims the sovereign right to control us, to strip us, even to slay us as it chooses. Truth will never stoop to be a servant but requires that all men serve it. It never flatters men and never compromises with them. It demands all or nothing and refuses to be used or patronized. It will be all in all or it will withdraw into silence. It was Christ who capitalized truth and revealed that it was not an it at all but a Being with all the attributes of personality. I am the Truth, He said, and followed truth straight to the cross. The truth seeker must follow Him there; and that is the reason few men seek truth."

The story so far.....

Gatherings disciples and announcing the manifesto of the Kingdom of God through the changing of water into wine, Jesus demonstrates that Peace and Joy are the outcomes of Kingdom living, visiting the temple Jesus reveals his zeal for the Father as he declares Justice for those seeking to find reconciliation. Through all this, he proclaims the old has been fulfilled by the new life found in him. While not entrusting himself to any one Jesus states to the leaders his authority referencing his power to rebuild a destroyed temple, we understand that he was speaking of his body, but the Pharisees did not, they send Nicodemus to investigate.

Point The Question they bring?

There is the underlying question, one that is not directly asked, but is implicit within the framework of the meeting, "prove to us who you are so we might know what to do with you, know how to treat you".

Challenge, What is the question you would ask God?

If you had the opportunity to ask God a question, what would it be?

It's always when allowing scripture to inform you, that is it worth considering the many people with whom this particular event interacts. First Nicodemus, and of course from him the Pharisee whom he represents. Then John's listeners as he first shares this written manuscript, and how they see this interchange from the view of Ephesus circa 80 AD. There is then the wider audience, how those in the Roman Empire found the words, and then to us reading this today. In all this, at some point, either sitting quietly by or when Jesus relays this account, the disciples hear of how the leaders of the people, the Pharisees were informed and challenged by Jesus.

Who is Nicodemus?

Nicodemus (/ˌnɪkəˈdiːməs/; Greek: Νικόδημος) is a Pharisee, and a member of the Sanhedrin mentioned in three places in the Gospel of John:

- * He first visits Jesus one night to discuss Jesus' teachings (John 3:1–21).
- * The second time Nicodemus is mentioned, he reminds his colleagues in the Sanhedrin that the law requires that a person is heard before being judged (John 7:50–51).
- * Finally, Nicodemus appears after the Crucifixion of Jesus to provide the customary embalming spices, and assists Joseph of Arimathea in preparing the body of Jesus for burial (John 19:39–42).

How long was this interview? More must have been said? Nicodemus didn't spend his time to have a conversation that lasted only thirty seconds. What we have are the salient points that the Holy Spirit inspired John to record. What we have is the essence of the nature of the whole book of the Bible compressed around these verses. A.W. Tozer once said "If we were to judge John 3:16 on the basis of it's value to the human race, we would have to say this is probably the most precious cluster of words ever assembled by the mind of an intelligent man; a twenty-five word compendium in which is contained the eternal Christian evangel, the message of genuine good news"

The Setting- Is Nicodemus serious, he comes based on Miracles and is in darkness

In what manner is Nicodemus approaching Jesus, why has John recorded the meeting in this manner. The Pharisee approaches Jesus at night. Many reasons have been put forward ranging from the desire for a private audience, to outright fear. Regardless of the original reason, John sees more to it. "The best clue lies in John's use of 'night' elsewhere: in each instance (3:2; 9:4; 11:10; 13:30) the word is either used metaphorically for moral and spiritual darkness, or, if it refers to the night-time hours, it bears the same moral and spiritual symbolism. Doubtless, Nicodemus approached Jesus at night, but his own 'night' was blacker than he knew."¹

The Paradigm- Nicodemus comes with a mindset that is looking to see if this is the Messiah as promised, and how Jesus can prove that to him?

Like many in the world, Nicodemus approaches Jesus on Nicodemus' terms and comes with a preconceived mindset, one which has an agenda, "Nicodemus does not suggest Jesus is a prophet, still less the prophet or the Messiah, but simply a teacher mightily endowed with God's power. Nicodemus was openly curious about Jesus, but still fell a long way short of confession that he was uniquely the promised Coming One."²

Like most leaders of his day, and therefore most Jews of the day, Salvation was based on works. To be sure one needed to be Jewish, either by birth or conversion, yet once inside this religious people, the day to day life was informed by keeping ritual and boundaries as prescribed by the traditions of the Elders about the law. The better one kept the law, the higher one's ranking within society and at least to their minds, thus the most blessed by God. The elders are always hoping to find the Messiah, who in their mind is a political leader who will overthrow the hated oppressors, in this case, the Romans, and return Israel to the glory days of King David's reign. They wanted someone who would work with them (at least in name), one suspects they wanted a person who would work for them. In Jesus they were discovering a person who was affecting the "body politic", but in ways, they were not expecting nor desiring. Salvation was only to be on their terms and in a predefined format. "Nicodemus is trying to set criteria to assess

who Jesus is, Jesus ignores this, and in turn, Jesus rejects the priority of Nicodemus, and radically questions his qualification for sorting out 'heavenly things.'³

The challenge- Jesus poses an opening gambit, Jesus pushes the boat out,

Jesus statement to Nicodemus is an "opening gambit", Jesus is metaphorically "pushing the boat out", to see if the person is genuine. To do this Jesus reveals an eternal truth, that we must be "born again", this may also be translated, as born from above or born with wind and spirit, all have connotations of new life from a source beyond that able to be generated by a human. Jesus is asking an unspoken question in response to the unspoken question of the Pharisees; they ask "Are you the one", Jesus responds "Would you like it to be true?"

Would you like it to be true? This statement, either direct or implicit is an amazingly powerful evangelistic tool, by asking and being answered one can ascertain the spiritual state of the inquiry, and then decide if further revelation is desirable. Is Nicodemus the right mindset, is he genuine in his desire to be informed? "As Christians today contemplate the Lord's return aright only if in consequence they purify themselves (1 Jn. 3:1-3), so Jews in Jesus' day best anticipated the coming of the Messiah when they most wanted to be transformed in line with the promises of life under the messianic age—to enjoy a new heart for God, cleansing and the fulness of the Spirit (e.g. Je. 31:28ff.; Ezk. 36:25-27)."⁴

ill- Linde forklifts.

Linde is a forklift manufacturer who reinvented the fork light, making the process of driving one quicker and easier, yet at the same time, unwittingly reducing the value of the established forklift drivers experience down to zero. Who needs a person with twenty years of driving a forklift if the new forklifts drive differently? In fact, people with no preconceived ideas are better. Understandable Linde forklifts cause major upset when introduced onto production lines, as people do not want the status quo threatened. It is the same with any paradigm shift and is no different here with a spiritual revelation by Jesus to the leaders of the day. Jesus challenges the paradigm of "this is

always the way we have done things”, Nicodemus and those he represents no longer are at the top of the pack, in fact, it becomes a humbling experience. All the training that a Pharisee went through is now for nought, they will need to be informed and guided by new principles, are they willing to submit to doing so.

Jesus is offering a new paradigm, that of Radical salvation. He is from their perspective, putting the cart before the horse. Showing that people need to be saved then in this realisation of what has happened responding by acts demonstrating this new found status as a person in God’s kingdom. The Pharisees taught the opposite, which was to perform supposed good works (as defined by their interpretation of the law), to make the grade to get to be in heaven, i.e. to act to be saved!

In this new way, Jesus uses references that were familiar to Nicodemus, that of water and new life, Jesus is referencing the Ezekiel illustration, the valley of dry bones. (READ Ezekiel 37:1-14), in this passage the prophet, Ezekiel has a vision of a valley of dead people then God’s Spirit is breathed into them, giving them life. Early the prophet records in Ezekiel 36:25 “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away, and you will no longer worship idols. And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.” To the trained Jewish leader water and Spirit are not unknowns, but they are misunderstood. Nicodemus is aware of this, yet we can know scripture, but we don’t appropriate it, it doesn’t radically transform our outlook on life. It becomes knowledge rather than life-giving.

Question- Difference between Religion and Faith, the Box vs. the effect of the Spirit which permeates our world.

In this world many people are religious, being told what to believe and what they must do about this belief. If they stay within a safely prescribed boundary, they will “get to heaven”. I call this "box theology", “stay inside the box and the box will transport you safely to where you need to go”, you may want to think of it as getting on a train and getting off at the "heaven stop”. The problem with this is it often leads to uncritical thinking about the

teaching or even no critical thinking, so people do things because they were told, or it was the done thing, or their parents did it. Its problems are many, but the greatest it is promises something it can't deliver, and so millions of humans die uninformed of the truth of the Kingdom of God.

Faith is active, permeating, challenging, growing. We do need to know what one puts their faith in, as followers of the Jewish Carpenter, we are putting our faith in Jesus. In doing so we are allowing, no asking him to inform our lives, and thus challenge our responses on a moment by moment basis. Phillipians 2:12-13 says, "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed— not only in my presence but now much more in my absence— continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose." The Holy Spirit permeates out world, enacting Gods will in his kingdom.

God calls those who are his to himself; he does this through the power of the Spirit. There is no formula for success; you cannot control God, you can only work with him. We need to understand in the Greek "This verse contains a wordplay which cannot be adequately expressed in English. The Greek word pneuma means both wind and Spirit. The work of the Spirit (pneuma) is invisible and mysterious like the blowing of the wind (pneuma). Man controls neither."⁵

To give an example, those who surf have learnt to read the waves, with the wisdom they know which ones will not provide the force needed to surf, and within their limits which ones will cause a "wipe out", yet those they do choose, with practice brings joy as they surf. They work with the power of the wave, they don't create it or cause it, but they ride with it. In the same way, those who sail use the ever changing flow of the wind to steer and power their sailing vessels, changing their stance to catch the power and force available to them. In both instances, achieving momentum by harnessing what is already present, done by the person adapting to the power around them, not the other way around.

We find Nicodemus fails to understand this illustration. Jesus now starts to question Nicodemus; turning the tables, it starts in his change of defence from "I" to "we", The simplest explanation for the plurals in this verse is that Jesus is sardonically aping the

plural that Nicodemus affected when he first approached Jesus (v. 2). 'Rabbi', Nicodemus said, 'we know you are a teacher who has come from God....' 'I tell you the truth', responds Jesus, 'we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen' — as if to say, 'We know one or two things too, we do!' 6 Jesus opening gambit, "Would you like it to be true", has now changed to "explain to me the things I have just told you", there is a subtext, "now you prove yourself to me?" It's worth noting that this is the same question posed by God to Job!

This Rebuke to Nicodemus becomes a rebuke to us all, everyone who listens or reads this page is asked the same question "are the things of heaven for you", Jesus swaps to "We" to mimic how he was addressed, speaking now not just to one person but to the wider audience. He is asking "Do you accept my testimony!"

The claim, Jesus is from heaven, we must not miss it. Jesus isn't ever claiming he is a nice man; Jesus shows he is not deluded or a madman, this Carpenter is God, Jesus knows it, Jesus proclaims it, Jesus has demonstrated it, and now Jesus wants us to respond to it.

Jesus said "No one has gone to heaven and returned", This is a direct attack on long-held beliefs, "In both Jewish intertestamental literature and later rabbinic accounts, Moses is portrayed as ascending to heaven to receive the Torah and descending to distribute it to men (e.g., Targum Ps 68:19.) In contrast to these Jewish legends, the Son is the only one who has ever made the ascent and descent."7 . If you want to know what's in heaven ask the one who has been there.

Jesus also is showing that entrance to this place is through him. Jesus challenges Nicodemus that if he can't understand things of this earth, he has no hope of heavenly things. "If you can't find the key to open the door, what's the point of telling you what is inside" Jesus is the key- The kingdom revealed to those who seek. To make his point Jesus references Number 21, recounting when there was a plague of snakes upon Israel. Stopping the effects involved the people choosing to look upon a bronze snake lifted by Moses for all to see, those who would turn from their ways and see the snake would be saved."Numbers 21:4–9 recounts the incident in which God punished the Israelites in the desert for their thankless complaints by sending serpents whose bite proved

fatal. Penitent prayer from Moses followed, and God commanded Moses to set up a bronze snake on a pole, directing those bitten by the serpents to look upon it and live.”⁸ "Nicodemus was being challenged to turn to Jesus for new birth in much the same way as the ancient Israelites were commanded to turn to the bronze snake for new life.”⁹

Combined with this Jesus introduces his favourite self-designation, the son of Man, from Daniel 7

"As my vision continued that night, I saw someone like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient One and was led into his presence. He was given authority, honour, and sovereignty over all the nations of the world so that people of every race and nation and language would obey him. His rule is eternal—it will never end. His kingdom will never be destroyed." - Dan 7:13-14

John Piper says about this passage "if you read that chapter you'll see that the Son of Man is a very exalted figure: not just a human figure but an exalted figure.”¹⁰

The references to the snakes show two things, how the sin and judgment of the people are removed by looking towards the symbol of salvation provided by God, but also that the pope of God was found guilty of sin. This may seem strange, but in the mindset of the leaders of Jesus "Many in Jesus' day believed that when the Messiah came, he would condemn Gentile nations and set Israel over them. But God's Son came into the world ... to save the world. The world was already condemned by its wickedness.”¹¹

We need to understand that the Messiah was not to show that the chosen people were better and thus prove it by scoring points against the non-chosen race, but to show the sinfulness of humanity, and the need for a saviour from the mess that we collectively are in!

Dear Reader, we are not nice people, we are sinners and sin is evil. Jesus shows that no punches will be pulled, Jesus says he is the way, not the temple or synagogues, to Nicodemus his whole way of life has just been challenged, how frightening was this!

It is worth considering what did Nicodemus do the next day, where did he go from here, it is then worth thinking about us, and what we will do?

Jesus sets puzzle pieces before Nicodemus, but only in light of the death and resurrection can these clues be interpreted to bring the accurate picture, how will we react to this? "God ... loved ... the world ... whoever believes ... perish ... eternal life. We cannot grasp this truth on the run. We have to linger and let its truth soak in. And each of us must take the time to substitute his or her name in place of the word whoever."12

Application

Are we willing to turn from where we now look and look towards who Jesus is, and what this then means to us!

What Judgement are we avoiding! Human response to the light reveals our lost condition (vv. 19–21). "Man's response to moral light, in conscience or God's Law, has been to choose darkness. This does not mean that every time we are faced with a moral choice each of us always chooses evil. It simply means that no one chooses the good every time. Often, even when we do the right thing, we do it from wrong motives or still feel an attraction to evil (v. 19)."13

How do we judge what is right or wrong, in today's world we assume that everything is permissible, this is not the case, nor what view Jesus held. Jesus says that there are Light and Darkness, the question is which life do you wish to have, what is a future you want, do you wish to keep living in fear and darkness, or are you willing to step into the light and be KNOWN.

What fear do you have that is stopping you from doing this? Engage with the moment of the Spirit. If Jesus is not your Lord and Saviour consider this; We started this text by a person asking a question of God. We were invited to discuss what we may ask of God if given the opportunity. To close we need to be aware, God will ask us a question, and our response will have eternal consequences, consider now what your response will be to God's question "How did you treat my son!"

- 1 D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 186.
- 2 Ibid 187.
- 3 Ibid 187.
- 4 Ibid 188.
- 5 Edwin A. Blum, "John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 281.
- 6 D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 198–199.
- 7 Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition Notes* (Biblical Studies Press, 2006), Jn 3:13
- 8 Doug Redford, *The Life and Ministry of Jesus: The Gospels*, vol. 1, *Standard Reference Library: New Testament* (Cincinnati, OH: Standard Pub., 2007), 110.
- 9 D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 202.
- 10 John Piper <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/why-is-jesus-called-son-of-man>
- 11 Doug Redford, *The Life and Ministry of Jesus: The Gospels*, vol. 1, *Standard Reference Library: New Testament* (Cincinnati, OH: Standard Pub., 2007), 111.
- 12 Ibid 111.
- 13 Larry Richards and Lawrence O. Richards, *The Teacher's Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1987), 717.