

Show Nicodemus video

The story of Nicodemus is a story of redemption, a story of the love of Christ who comes to us and gives us new life. Nico, for short, because I imagine that's the name he'd go by today, was a Pharisee, a leader of the Pharisees. A leader of the leaders, in fact. He was one of the 70 Jewish leaders of the Sanhedrin, the official ruling body who settled matters against Jewish law. The Sanhedrin was sort of like the Supreme Court. The Romans allowed this council to handle religious matters, and they were the ones who eventually found Jesus guilty of treason.

Nico was a powerful man, someone with considerable influence. He based his entire life on following God's law, all 613 of them. He was so serious about his religion, about God, that he followed religious law to a T, a Bible literalist. He had been taught all his life that if he followed God's commandments, then he would be saved. He would be rewarded in the afterlife. And so, he dedicated his whole life to this teaching and holding others accountable to it as well.

Nico was a Bible scholar. He not only knew all 613 laws, but he knew all the stories that had been passed down for generations. His knowledge was built on facts, eyewitness accounts, and logic – about who God is and how to be a part of the kingdom of God. Since he was born a Jew, Nico was taught that he was born into the kingdom of God.

Imagine his shock and misunderstanding when Jesus told him that he needed to be reborn to enter the kingdom. This went against everything he had been taught. He understood to follow the rules,

but Jesus said, **“It’s not about the rules. It’s about being “born from above”** (v. 3). Now, imagine the misunderstanding when Jesus uses metaphor for the concept of rebirth. Nico doesn't understand the use of metaphor. He takes Jesus' words literally just like he has taken the Torah literally his entire life.

His confusion is understandable. He asks: “How can these things be?” (v.9) – “By entering the mother's womb a second time?” (v.4). Part of him is trying to work it out logically since he has always taken the law literally, yet another part of him is being facetious by showing how ridiculous Jesus sounds. Here is a man of knowledge, a “teacher of Israel,” (v.10) and he just doesn't get it. He doesn't understand the basics of faith. He doesn't understand this new theology.

But, he does have a curiosity. Many of his colleagues just wrote off Jesus and were determined to do away with him to preserve their power. **God got to Nico's heart.** Nico heard about the miracles Jesus had been performing, and he knew he had to be from God. He just didn't believe that he was God. Nico had questions that needed to be answered, so he approached Jesus with respect, as a teacher, as a rabbi, as his equal.

Nico goes to speak to Jesus one-on-one, like he probably has done with other colleagues at his level. What he finds is someone he has never met before. Someone who totally blows his mind and makes him question everything he has ever been taught.

The heart of the matter lies with Nico's first question: **“How can anyone be born after having grown old?”** (v.4). As we age, we become set in our ways and in our thinking. Our beliefs are solid as well as our unbelief. We just can't wrap our heads

around a new way of thinking. We just can't turn our lives upside down and follow a new way of living, that goes against everything we have known up until this point. If we do, does that mean that we have wasted our lives following the wrong teaching?

Many just can't bear to face that question. Our unbelief becomes a wound that keeps us distant from God. At any age, it's good to work out our faith in our minds, to seek knowledge and understanding, to understand different theologies. But, when it comes down to it, it's not about the rules. It's not about having the facts and the details to prove this is the way to live our lives. It's about love. We can't explain faith solely with our minds. It is something we experience with our hearts and our lives.

Nico shows us that even the educated and powerful are still searching. God opens his heart to the possibility of rebirth, even as an old man. It was completely different from what he had been taught, yet meeting Jesus completely turns his life upside down. Meeting Jesus is supposed to do that. If we keep living our lives exactly the same way after we experience Christ, then we really haven't experienced Christ. We haven't experienced rebirth. We have only experienced our first birth, our physical birth.

Jesus says we must be "born of the water and Spirit" (v.5). Water represents our physical birth and also our baptism. The Spirit represents our spiritual birth, the inner workings of grace. Our physical and spiritual lives come together as we are reborn and become whole. Experiencing

rebirth and receiving new life in Christ heals our wound of unbelief.

Nico doesn't let his wound of unbelief keep him distant from Christ. In this passage, he leaves and thinks about his conversation with Jesus. He is a scholar, that's how he processes things, but God keeps working on his heart and mind. Nico does become a believer and follower of Christ even in his old age. Later, he "speaks out boldly against his fellow Pharisees during the confrontations of Jesus' final week in Jerusalem."¹ Then after Jesus' crucifixion, Nico joins Joseph of Arimathea in providing expensive spices to bury Jesus. He would not take these chances of going against his law-abiding colleagues if he didn't believe.

Nico's curiosity leads him to rebirth, a new life in Christ. He isn't ushered in to the kingdom by his heritage but by his belief in who Jesus is. He works out his faith in his logical mind as best as he can and he experiences it in his heart. God's love heals his wound, and he is reborn. Nico has the answer to his question: Someone can be born after having grown old.

By understanding that God so loved, we can experience rebirth at any age and at any time in our lives. God so loved, the world, us, that God gave us love, the Son. When we believe, we receive that love into our lives. We are reborn and become part of the kingdom. We become love. It's not about the rules. It's about the love that God gives so generously. Amen.

¹ J. Barrie Shepherd, *Disciplines* 2020, 92.