

The Man Behind the Mask

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The third chapter of John's Gospel records the most important message that any church in the entire world has to give. But the third chapter actually begins back in the second chapter:

Now when he [the Lord 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 any should testify of man; for he knew what was in man. (John 2:23-25)

That is a very remarkable passage and certainly a fitting introduction to the man behind the mask.

Now the Lord Jesus had come up to Jerusalem for the first time as He began His ministry. He had cleansed the temple and healed multitudes. Many of the people, we are told, believed on Him. To be very frank with you, I would have recorded all these people as converts if I'd been there. But we are told by John that Jesus did not commit Himself to them. Literally, He did not believe in them. They believed in Him, but He did not believe in them because their faith rested on the fact that He was a miracle worker rather than on the fact that He was a Savior. And He didn't want that kind of follower. So we're told that He did not commit Himself to that crowd for the reason that He knew what was *in* man, and He did not need that anybody testify of man. You see, you needn't go to Jesus and say to Him, "Mr. So-and-so is this or that kind of a man" — He already knows it. May I say to you that here we have something that is quite remarkable.

There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. (John 3:1)

Now, "There was a man of the Pharisees...." This man the Lord Jesus trusted, and that night He revealed to him something that He had not revealed to even His apostles (and He did not reveal it to them until two and a half years later). When they were in Caesarea Philippi six months before He went to Jerusalem, the Lord Jesus said to His apostles, "We are going to Jerusalem, and I'm going to die." And did they believe it? No. Simon Peter says, "Far be that from You, Lord. We're interested in a kingdom, not Your death." (See Matthew 16:21, 22.) They didn't comprehend it at first. Five times on the way down to Jerusalem Jesus repeated it. And it finally got through to them that He was going to die upon a Roman cross for the sins of the world. The remarkable thing is that He revealed it at the very beginning to Nicodemus.

I would like you to know this man Nicodemus, to get acquainted with him. Note the three things said about him. The Spirit of God has a way of giving a biography by saying only three things. You and I don't do it that way. He has a way of putting things together so that the three things He says about this man are all we need to know.

Many years ago, there was a man here in southern California who wrote biographies of preachers, and one day I met him on the street in Pasadena. I asked whose biography he was writing, and he told me. So I asked, "How are you getting along?"

"I'm having a lot of trouble."

"What's the trouble?"

"Keeping the back page from rubbing against the front page — there's not much to say about that man."

"But the Holy Spirit can write all we need to know about a person in only three short sentences."

“Well, I’m not the Holy Spirit, and I have to write it differently.”

Now notice the three things said about Nicodemus. He was a man of the Pharisees, that’s number one. Second, his name was Nicodemus, and third, he was a ruler of the Jews.

I want to submit to you that this man functioned like that in life. When he came to the Lord Jesus he was wearing a mask. The Lord Jesus removed that mask because He deals with us just as we are, not behind a mask. Now let’s examine this brief biography of Nicodemus. He was a man of the Pharisees, his name was Nicodemus, and he was a ruler of the Jews.

He Was a Man of the Pharisees

The Pharisees represented the best in Israel at that time. They were a religio-political party. As a religious party they were conservative. They believed in the Old Testament miracles, the integrity of Scripture, and the resurrection. As a political party they wanted to throw off the yoke of Rome and establish the Davidic kingdom again here upon this earth. That was the way they moved, and this man Nicodemus was a man of the Pharisees. He moved out among the people, and when he went by they would say, “That’s Nicodemus, he’s a man of the Pharisees.” They thought they knew him, but actually underneath they did not know him.

He Was a Ruler of the Jews

He met with the Sanhedrin, which meant he was way up there in the upper echelons where they made decisions. And this man moved among them with great dignity. The other members of the Sanhedrin — those men who thought they knew him — did not know him.

Down underneath that mask that he’s wearing, he is just plain little old Nicky. And the Lord Jesus is going to deal with him as plain little old Nicky — that’s good psychologically, by the way. The head of the psychology department of the University of Southern California used to sit near the back of the auditorium on Thursday nights at the Bible study I was conducting. He used to correct me quite often on my psychology, but in regard to this portion of Scripture he said, “You’re right on target here. You are accurate about this man Nicodemus.”

A great many people today function like that. They wear a mask to church and you don’t really get acquainted with them, you don’t really know who they are.

For example, here’s a businessman today. He comes to his office in the morning, and the staff that works for him gets busy all of a sudden — they had been loafing, but now the boss has come and they get busy. And one of them turns to the new member of the staff and says, “That’s Mr. Jones, the boss.” The secretary says to the boss, “There’s a man waiting to see you.” When she shows him in, this man says, “Mr. Jones, I’ve come to talk to you about a business deal, and, by the way, how’s business?” Mr. Jones says, “Oh, business is great! Everything is fine.” And he’s very dignified at the office there.

But at noon he goes to the club, and when he goes in, he’s not Mr. Jones, the boss. They say to him, “Hello, Bill,” and he says, “Hello, Jim.” They pat each other on the back, and Jim asks, “How is business doing?” He says, “Oh, business is great.”

But that evening he goes back home, he drives up in his big Cadillac, gets out, walks in, closes the door, and drops down in a chair. His wife comes over, puts her arm around him and asks, “What’s the matter, Bill? Is business bad?” He says, “It’s lousy.” And you say, that man is a hypocrite! No, he’s not. That’s the way he functions: he is a businessman, he is a member of

the club, but he is also a husband at home, and I doubt that even his wife really knows him.

But Nicodemus, he's a man of the Pharisees, and he wears that mask. He's a ruler of the Jews, and he wears that mask. But down underneath he is plain little old Nicky, and the Lord Jesus is going to deal with plain little old Nicky, not with a man of the Pharisees, not with a ruler of the Jews, and not with Mr. Businessman, either. My friend, the Lord Jesus will deal with you just as you are. That's the only way you can come to Him. "He needed not that any should testify of man." He knows what is in man. He knows who you are. Don't put up a front with Him.

I used to put up a front in prayer by trying to kid the Lord, you know. I told Him one time I needed a new automobile so I could do better pastoral work, but really I'd met a new girl, and that was the reason I wanted the new car. I never told the Lord that, but He knew it and He let me have the car anyway!

Now as this man comes, you watch him approach the Lord Jesus.

The same came to Jesus by night.... (John 3:2)

Now don't find fault with Nicodemus for coming by night. That was the best time to come. He was a busy man, and Jesus was very busy. Nighttime was when Nicodemus should come.

If you're going to find fault with him for coming at night, then why not find fault with the Lord's Supper? It was not established at an eleven o'clock morning service. It was established, I guess, around midnight. When in Israel I always have gone down the pathway the Lord Jesus took on that last night. The Upper Room that is there now is not the real one but the eleventh century one. But there was a room in that vicinity, and it was upstairs. Near midnight Jesus established the Lord's Supper there. It wasn't established in a church. These people today who say, "Oh, you've got to have communion in a church." Well, they should have been in Jerusalem to tell the Lord that, because He didn't know it. He used an upper room and it was night.

So this man Nicodemus came at night:

...and said unto him, Rabbi [teacher], 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.
(John 3:2)

Now, there's something in that statement that is so tremendous! The first thing I mention is this: Did you know that the enemy never did question the miracles of Jesus? Nicodemus represents the Pharisees, the enemy — although they were friendly at the beginning. He is saying that the Pharisees recognize that He is performing miracles — and not just a few. We have a record of a few miracles in the Gospels, but read the Gospels and notice statements like this: He healed the *multitudes* (see Matthew 12:15, 19:2, and Luke 5:15).

Someone has asked the question: When He made His headquarters in Capernaum, why did He heal so many people there? Well, I found at least a partial answer to that question when we were in Tiberias. It's a lovely place. It wasn't in existence in Christ's day. The cities that were in existence in His day, He pronounced a judgment on them and they are gone. Tiberias is a new place, and right down from Tiberias are the springs to which people still come from everywhere because of their therapeutic value. So many sick people were in that area when Jesus was there,

and He didn't heal two or three blind men or two or three crippled men, He healed several *thousands* of them. Multitudes came to Him and He healed them. There was no question about His healing. There *is* a question about healing today, but there is no question about the healing done by the Lord Jesus. He *healed*. The enemy admitted that. They never charged that He did not heal people.

When Nicodemus comes to Jesus that night he's sincere. He says, "We know." Who's we? We Pharisees. They had a meeting, I think, and Nicodemus was appointed the leader — "Brother Nicodemus, you go see Him. You meet with Him." So Nicodemus met with Him that night, and he began by saying, "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." That was flattery, but it was genuine flattery. If he had been wrong, our Lord would have corrected Him. Later on when the disciples of the Pharisees came, He said, "Ye hypocrites, who warned you to come?" (See Matthew 3:7 and Luke 3:7.) He didn't say that to Nicodemus, for Nicodemus was genuine. But, I'll say this, the Lord will take off his mask.

Listen to Him now as He answers Nicodemus.

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. (John 3:3)

After Nicodemus had said, "No man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him," Jesus answered, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born *again*..." I'd like to change the word "again" because it has gotten worn out and has practically lost its meaning. In the original, "again" is *anothan*, a Greek word that literally means "from above." Though the word also can be translated "again," what it means is "from above." He says here, "Except a man be born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Why did He mention the kingdom of God? Because Nicodemus wanted to talk about that. Now, I don't know about this, but I have a notion the Pharisees had talked it over: "Look, a new prophet has come down from the north, from Galilee. The people are following Him. He is performing miracles. Now if we can just hitch our wagon to His star, we could go places. Somebody should go and talk to Him, because He's from up in the country, and He doesn't know how to manipulate the politicians as we people down here do." And so it seems that Nicodemus came down to the Lord Jesus with that proposition. And the Lord Jesus called his hand immediately. He lifted the mask of "a man of the Pharisees" from that man's face by saying to him, "Except a man be born from above, he cannot even see the kingdom of God," and Nicodemus had wanted to talk about that.

Now notice that Nicodemus has another mask. He puts it on in a hurry.

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? (John 3:4)

He missed it entirely, but you can see he is now the ruler of the Jews. It is as if he's saying to the Lord Jesus: "What are You talking to me about? Are You trying to tell me something *new*? Don't You know that I'm a ruler of the Jews? If anything is known about this, I would know about it. How can this thing be? It's ridiculous, this thing that You're talking about."

Now the Lord Jesus is going to take off the second mask. Will you notice:

Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. (John 3:5)

Nicodemus, you need to be born again. You need to be born from *above* — or you can't even discuss this matter of the kingdom of God because you know nothing about it. Here the Lord Jesus strips off the other mask.

Now there has always been a question of what the Lord Jesus meant by “born of water.” There are those who feel that “water” is simply water baptism. I am confident He did not mean that at all because at this stage He's not using water in that connection, and later in His ministry we read that the Lord Jesus never baptized. So evidently He means something else here. A further question is what does He mean by “be born of water and of the Spirit?”

Well, I believe the water here refers to the Word of God. If you go over a little bit farther to John 7:37-39, you will find out that during that great final day of the Feast of Tabernacles they brought up water from the pool of Siloam and poured it out over the temple floor. I believe that the Lord Jesus stood in the temple that day and cried out,

If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.

Then John hastens to add that He was speaking of the Holy Spirit. So, the Holy Spirit and the Word of God are tied together. It is said of the church that the Lord Jesus “gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word” (Ephesians 5:25, 26). And we find in John 15:3, “Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you.” The best bar of soap is not Ivory, it is the Bible — it has cleansing power. And when the Holy Spirit takes the Word of God and applies it to an individual who is a lost sinner, then that lost sinner can become a son of God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And that, my friend, is the work of the Holy Spirit using the Word of God.

I do not believe that you can be saved through sentimental songs or sentimental talks. The only thing that can save a sinner is the Spirit of God using the *Word* of God. That is exactly what the Lord Jesus is talking to Nicodemus about. At least He has taken off the mask of the ruler of the Jews.

The Lord Jesus, though, goes on. He says,

That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. (John 3:6)

What He is doing here is putting down a tremendous principle of why the new birth is necessary, why you must be born from above — because that which is born of the flesh, it's flesh. We can do wonders with the flesh. We can improve it. When I was born, I didn't know A from B. They sent me to school and I found out that there's more than A and B. Education was very wonderful. And then, I didn't have any manners. I used to run into the house with my cap on when my mother had company. She would say, “Son, take your cap off. You're in the house and we have company.” So I took my cap off. I had to be taught that, you know. I still to this good day when I'm wearing a hat, if I get on an elevator and if there's women there, I take my hat

off. I did it in London one day. I just took my hat off, and a man standing next to me looked at me for a minute or two, then he took his hat off. But when I got on an elevator right here in Los Angeles and I took my hat off, there were two women in there talking, and I found out they were Women's Libbers, so I put my hat back on. They asked for it, so I'm going to give it to them. Oh, the flesh can be taught so many things. We had in Nashville, Tennessee, a school that taught girls how to hold a tea cup. You'd be surprised how important that little finger is in holding a tea cup! That's all manners. We have to be taught those things.

But, friends, after you've educated the flesh, after you've taught it manners, it's still *flesh*. You can give it all of this psychological self-esteem gospel that's being promulgated today, and when you get through with it you've got some nice polite individuals, but not one has been born from above. The Spirit of God has to produce a new nature. The Holy Spirit is not improving the old nature at all, although the old nature could stand a whole lot of improving.

Now will you notice Nicodemus. The Lord Jesus has stripped him of his mask and he stands there. He's really poor little old Nicky now. The Lord Jesus continues,

Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again [from above]. The wind bloweth where it willeth, and thou hearest the sound of it, but canst not tell from where it cometh, and where it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit. (John 3:7, 8)

Even the weatherman we listen to on the radio and TV misses. Oh, how he missed it the other day. He said we were going to have an off-shore wind, and it was an on-shore wind for a week. He admitted that they had missed it. The wind blows where it wills; we don't know where it comes from or where it goes, but it comes from somewhere and it must go somewhere — but, said the Lord Jesus, you don't know where.

And now Nicodemus is ready to hear.

Nicodemus answered, and said unto him, How can these things be? (John 3:9)

Isn't that wonderful? This is the man who knew everything — “We know,” he had said. Oh, these conceited people today! God can't save you, friends, if you are in the “we know” crowd. But now Nicky is ready to hear — “How can these things be?” So Jesus answered, with gentle sarcasm, “Art thou a teacher of Israel, and knowest not these things?” (John 3:10). In other words, “Where's that mask you had on a while ago when you knew everything? What about that?”

The Lord Jesus is going to speak to him very clearly, and I'm going to drop down to verse 14:

And, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up.

Nicodemus knew what Jesus was talking about because he knew that in the Old Testament God had sent fiery serpents. He knew that God had directed Moses to make a bronze serpent to represent the sins of the people and lift it up on a pole. And all the people had to do was *look* to live, and now He says to him, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent, I'm going to be lifted up. I

who knew no sin will be made sin for you in order that you might be saved.”

Now notice the following verses,

That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son.... (John 3:15, 16)

God loved the *whole world*. I don't know what you "election boys" do with that verse, but it is in the Word of God. Anyone can be saved who will turn to Jesus. He is the propitiation for the sins of the *whole world*.

On my last tour to Israel I stood looking up at Gordon's Calvary, the site we accept as being the place of our Lord's crucifixion. His agony, His crucifixion, His burial, all took place in an area the size of a football field. He was crucified up there, and down below there is the empty tomb — not far apart. You can stand in the same place and see both locations. I told our tour group, which was standing there with me, "Our salvation was wrought out in this geographical place. He did it here for you and for me."

Today there is a busy bus station on the street below that bluff, which we call Calvary. While I was standing there at the corner, a crowd came up to go across the street, and an Arab boy lifted up my shirt and started to put his hand in where my billfold was. He got his hand into the pocket, but he didn't get the billfold. I whirled on him, and I called him a thief. He walked across the street and in a few minutes a taxi came by. There were several boys who climbed in and began to take out of their pockets what they had stolen. I had called that young fellow a thief, and I would have given anything in the world if I could have gone over to him and said, "Look, right up there a Man died on a cross between two thieves. He saved one of them, and He can save you." But I couldn't speak Arabic, and he couldn't understand English. We have an Arabic radio broadcast that reaches that area — I hope he hears about the Man who died up there between two thieves and died for *him*, if you please. "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever..." *Whosoever*, that's Vernon McGee and that Arab boy and that's you! "Whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

Did Nicodemus ever make a decision for Christ? Well, the Bible doesn't tell us, but it does give us some clues. When the chief priests and the Pharisees wanted Jesus arrested, the officers they sent returned empty handed.

Then came the officers to the chief priests and Pharisees; and they said unto them, Why have ye not brought him? The officers answered, Never man spoke like this man. (John 7:45, 46)

Then the Pharisees ridiculed the officers for being deceived and said,

Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on him? But this people, who knoweth not the law, are cursed. (John 7:48, 49)

Now listen to Nicodemus as he speaks up:

Nicodemus saith unto them, (he that came to Jesus by night, being one of them), doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth? (John

7:50, 51)

Now, I'd admit that's a weak defense, but it *is* a defense for the Lord Jesus before the powerful Sanhedrin.

Another clue that Nicodemus became a believer was the day when the Lord Jesus was crucified and, I say this reverently, Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus served as the undertakers to handle the body.

And after this Joseph, of Arimathaea, 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. He came, therefore, and took the body of Jesus. And there came also Nicodemus, who 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. (John 19:38-40)

I suppose those two men, Joseph and Nicodemus, worked two or three hours. They would have first anointed the body with costly oil, then wrapped it with linen strips and sealed them with spices like a mummy. Each finger would have been wrapped separately, then the hand, the arm, and the whole body. This is the reason that, on the morning of the resurrection when John looked into the tomb and saw those stiffened linen wrappings undisturbed and the body gone, he knew the Lord Jesus had risen from the dead.

When I was in Israel I looked into that tomb again and thought of those two men in there working on the body of Jesus. When they came to those awful wounds that He had — the body of Jesus was so bloody — and when they saw that spear wound in His side, I think probably Nicodemus said, “Joseph, I remember the night three years ago when He told me, ‘As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up.’ And then He went on to say, ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him....’” And I think Nicodemus said, “Joseph, I believe in Him.” I feel that this man Nicodemus came to faith in the Lord.

My friend, like Nicodemus believed and Joseph of Arimathaea believed, you have the same opportunity to trust the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior and become a child of God through faith in Christ.