
Nicodemus and Christ

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by Pastor Mark Perkins

Nicodemus is a Greek name that means 'Victor of the People'.

Nicodemus is found only in John's Gospel, in John 3:1-10; 7:37-52; and 19:38-42.

John 3:1 names him as a man of the Pharisees and a ruler of the Jews, which means that he was member of the Sanhedrin. A glimpse at this ruling body will reveal much about the man.

The Sanhedrin

The word "Sanhedrin" comes from the Greek SUNEDRION, 'a sitting place together'. It describes many people sitting together in the same place.

In the second and third centuries, the Persians, then the Greeks began to grant the Jews some privileges of self rule. The ruling counsel of the Sanhedrin finds its roots there, but the actual organization did not come into being until the time of the Maccabees, about 190 B.C.

They patterned themselves after the 70 elders of Moses' appointment in Numbers 11:16, and claimed to exist continually since that time (about 1400 B.C.).

The Sanhedrin consisted of 70 members, presided over by the High Priest of the Jews. After the High Priest, the leadership fell to the Chief Priests, and then to the rank and file of the elders.

The powers and religious alignment of the Sanhedrin rose and fell throughout the time from its inception to Christ's era. Sometimes it was dominated by Hellenists, sometimes by nationalists. Sometimes it had a great amount of influence over the lives of the Jews, sometimes hardly any. Sometimes it ruled much land, others only a small sliver.

At this time, 27 A.D. the Sanhedrin was dominated by a conciliatory branch of Jews known as the Sadducees, although there was a strong branch of Pharisees as well. They had a lot of power over both spiritual and secular matter,

although only in Judea. However, all of Israel felt the influence of their power, and no place was truly free from their tyranny.

The Sanhedrin was a court much akin to the supreme court of the United States. When a lower court could not come to a decision, then the higher court would have to intervene. During Christ's time, the Sanhedrin was trusted with most of the civil as well as religious cases. They had a tremendous influence on internal affairs, and apparently no small influence even in cases of capital crimes.

The Sanhedrin had its own police force, and no doubt had a constant temptation to abuse the powers of arrest. Otherwise, they would follow simple rules of jurisprudence.

Nicodemus was a rank and file member of the Sanhedrin minority party. He was just an elder.

He was one of the legalistic Pharisees. He would have an influence on policy, even though in the minority. The greater Sanhedrin could not rule effectively without the input and cooperation of men like Nicodemus.

The Sadducees were the aristocratic and Romantic branch of the Jewish Leadership. They were very anti-supernatural in their world view, even denying the afterlife. They remained very materialistic, and were sycophantic toward the Roman rulers in order to retain their wealth.

The Pharisees were scholars, although extremely legalistic in their outlook, fanatics for making laws that did not exist. The Pharisees fashioned themselves as the champions of the people and yet were very oppressive in their rule.

Both considered themselves the best. Both were wrong. Nicodemus, however, was an honest man with positive volition.

READ John 3:19

Nicodemus was apparently a famous man, a member of the ruling council of the Pharisees, the Sanhedrin.

Nicodemus in John 3

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. The original language shows a little surprise at this appearance, perhaps because the Pharisees were already more than a little leery of Christ. The night time appearance reveals his desire to keep the visit a secret. Nicodemus did not want the other Pharisees to know about this. It also shows his positive volition to Jesus Christ.

Nicodemus' first words reveal his positive volition further. He has put two and two together in his own mind about Christ, and makes a statement to this effect. 'Rabbi, we know that you have come as a teacher from God; for no one is able to do these signs which you do, unless God is with him.' This statement does not go all the way; but it is true.

Jesus' reply is a compliment. It assumes the best of Nicodemus that he is a believer. What he is saying is this: that Nicodemus' statement reveals that he has seen the kingdom of God, born from above is a reference to salvation.

Nicodemus' question in reply to his misunderstanding of Jesus' statement is relevant "How can a man (anthropos) being old be born?" Someone who is already a man cannot be born. You are born and then you become a man. He makes his point really clear by his example: 'He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?' Jesus was speaking on a spiritual level and Nicodemus on an earthly one.

Jesus reply in 1:5 is a clarification for Nicodemus. "Unless anyone is born of water and the Spirit, he is not able to enter into the kingdom of God."

Notice that this is a parallel of His previous statement except that he substitutes "enter into the kingdom of God" for "see the kingdom of God".

Our Lord is responding to the mistake of Nicodemus, and also changing his assessment. Instead of assuming that Nicodemus is a believer, Christ now assumes that he has yet to enter the kingdom.

'Born of water and the Spirit' is especially pertinent because it reveals two births.

Born of water is not a reference to baptism. Instead it is a reference to human birth. Before every birth, the woman's water breaks (actually it

is the fluid from the amniotic sac). Born of water is reference to this. It appears that every person is born of water, and this is a good way to make it clear that you are talking about human birth.

Born of the spirit is a reference to salvation, where God the Holy Spirit makes the new believer a new creature in Christ through His baptizing ministry.

Our Lord's implication is this: that you must be both a man and a believer in order to enter the kingdom of God. In a roundabout way he also tells Nicodemus that he is right about the first birth, but wrong about the second.

In 1:6, Jesus gives even further clarification on the matter. "That which is born from the flesh is flesh, and that which is born from the Spirit is Spirit."

This simply divides birth into two categories: fleshly birth and spiritual birth.

It takes the point of view of origin in the matter of birth. The kind of birth which you have is a matter of the origin of that birth.

In 1:7 Christ deals with Nicodemus' mistake. "Do not take surprise that I said to you, 'It is necessary for you to be born from above.' In the next verse, our Lord draws an analogy to explain this statement. These two verses, 7 and 8, are Christ's final explanation of His first statement. Essentially He says, 'do not misunderstand.' Nicodemus was not amazed, he misunderstood.

The analogy that Christ uses is this: "The wind blows where it wills and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes or where it is going; so is everyone who is born from the Spirit."

Christ is emphasizing that this is an invisible birth.

The birth from above is one which we know exists. We can see the results of it in believers (the sound).

Unlike the birth from flesh, we cannot perceive with our senses the origin or destination of the birth from above.

In other words, Christ is just showing a further distinction between the two kinds of birth, so that Nicodemus will clearly know in his own mind that there is a spiritual birth.

In Nicodemus' final words he reiterates his positive volition. He says, "How can these things come to pass?"

Nicodemus uses the demonstrative adverb TAUTA to form the subject of his reply. It is a word that must be defined by a previous reference. It is translated, 'these things', and it goes back to these things:

The birth from above that gives insight into the kingdom of God.

The birth from above that enables one to enter the kingdom of God.

The birth from above that comes from the ministry of God the Holy Spirit.

The ministry of the Spirit that is invisible yet very real, and with a will of its own.

By using the verb GINOMAI instead of the verb ESTIN, he shows his desire for the second birth. Nicodemus wants to know how to get the second birth for himself. GINOMAI is the verb of becoming, not of being. GINOMAI always indicates a change, an entrance into a new status.

Furthermore, Nicodemus uses DUNATAI, the verb of ability. By using DUNATAI, Nicodemus reveals his desire to know mechanics; to know what is to be done to gain entrance into God's kingdom.

Nicodemus asks this question in such a way as to reveal a personal desire for this information he wants to become a believer.

Later passages reveal that at some point Nicodemus did accept Christ. His words in John 7 and his deeds in John 19 reveal it.

John 1:10, "Jesus answered and said to him, "You are the teacher of Israel and do not know these things?"

This verse is more of an exclamation than anything. Nicodemus as a member of the Sanhedrin should be an expert on salvation. He is a leader of his nation, and one who holds grave judicial responsibilities.

This also serves as a reminder of the kind of leadership that Israel had at the time. It was weak spiritually, and so the rank and file in the country would be exceedingly weak. This is why Christ

would not trust the new believers. They had very little inherent restraint on the sin nature.

John 1:11, "Truly, truly I say to you that we speak that which we have known, and we testify what we have seen, and you do not receive our testimony."

The formula amen stands as a pre-certification for what is to follow. Christ uses it to convince His hearers of the verity of His statement before they even listen to His words.

The two second verbs, oidamen and heorakamen are both in the perfect tense. In this case, they show something that is a life changing event the intervention of God. Christ uses the first person plural because He speaks for his followers and disciples as well. So, His disciples speak because God has intervened, and they know it. They testify because God has intervened and they have seen it. The knowing has to do with the doctrines, especially kingdom doctrines that Christ teaches. The seeing has to do with the miracles and healings that are done by Christ.

All of this earnest testimony and speech, and yet the Sanhedrin does not receive it. Christ employs the second person singular [you all], so He speaks to more than just Nicodemus.

Christ chides Nicodemus and his Pharisee and Sanhedrin mates so that Nicodemus might understand that this is not his first opportunity to receive the gospel. Perhaps Nicodemus was a part of the Sanhedrin task force sent to John the Baptist to find out whether Christ was fit to be their Messiah.

But Christ is getting at something more...

John 1:12, "If I spoke to you [all] earthly things and you [all] do not believe, how will you believe if I were to speak heavenly things?"

Christ uses a really fascinating conditional sentence. He begins in reality, by citing in the protasis what has already occurred. Then He postulates from the protasis what should logically occur as a result.

'If I spoke to you earthly things...' This has really happened. The aorist indicative of lego reveals this as an actual past event. Christ has spoken to Nicodemus and others about earthly things.

Their response was unbelief, one and all. Nicodemus, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Sanhedrin, they have all rejected Christ on the earthly level.

Now Christ postulates with the aorist subjunctive. This applies a likely outcome to a circumstance. The circumstance is Christ telling the Jewish leadership about heavenly things. The likely outcome is unbelief. The kind of reasoning here is simple: if the Jewish leadership is unable to believe an easy thing, then how will they ever believe the more difficult? It is like saying, 'Because you could not lift 100 lbs., it is fair to assume that you cannot lift 200 lbs.'

Christ uses the second person plural to impersonalize this principle. He does not want Nicodemus to believe that He applies it to him.

This discourse on the negative volition of the Jewish leadership precedes the giving of the gospel, and for a reason. Jesus helps to identify for Nicodemus a sense of destiny about his unique position in the Sanhedrin as a believer. Remember, this reproof of Christ's is directed at a body of men, not Nicodemus directly.

You, too, can have this kind of unique destiny by being a believer in a time when belief is not so popular. For Nicodemus, there was some of the greatest peer pressure against belief in God of all time, and yet He wanted to believe. This reproof and brief discourse is all about helping Nicodemus to identify himself, and separate himself from his peers.

John 1:13, "And no one has ascended into heaven, except the one who first descended from heaven, the Son of Man."

The **Son of Man** is a prophetic term, a reference to Christ's relationship with Adam.

It occurs 107 times in the Old Testament, but only fourteen times outside of Ezekiel. In those cases outside of Ezekiel, it is almost universally an idiom for 'human being'. But in one instance in Daniel, it most certainly refers to Adam himself. The one time that it is used in the singular in Daniel is 7:13, and this is the reference for the popular term in New Testament times.

Daniel 7:13,14, "I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven one like a Son of Adam was coming. And He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed."

The "Ancient of Days" is an Aramaic title that refers to God the Father as judge of Jesus Christ. Daniel 7:7-22 is the only instance of this title for God the Father. It concentrates on his eternal nature, and His authority over the other two members of the Godhead.

God would judge the sins of mankind in the Son of Adam on the cross.

God gave two evaluations of His Son during the incarnation 'This is my Son, whom I love, in whom I am well pleased.' Once at His baptism, and once at the transfiguration.

The picture presented in Daniel's vision is the transfer of authority from God the Father to Jesus Christ the Son. This transfer of authority occurred in heaven most likely immediately before the incarnation. This is something of a Christmas story from Daniel. It is a revelation of the moments before the incarnation of Christ, the sad/glad going away ceremony for the Son. From that moment forward God the Son would never be the same. He would become the God man, and though His deity did not change, His status did. This is the moment when Christ voluntarily restricted the independent use of His divine attributes, and the independent expression of His divine character. This moment was somewhat akin to taking a military oath.

The earthly transfer of authority took place at Christ's baptism.

The term 'the Son of Man' describes here Christ's relationship to the first man, Adam.

READ Romans 5:12-21.

Naturally, this verse would be a popular one with an oppressed nation such as Israel.

In Ezekiel the prophet himself is addressed as the son of Adam, an identification of him as one belonging to the human race.

By the time that Christ came on the scene, the Son of Man was a popular term, and needed no explanation whatsoever. Never once in the New Testament does the use of the term require an explanation to the readers or listeners. It is simply used. Christ employed the direct Greek translation of the term, which used the noun anthropos as a translation for the Hebrew Adam.

Now the verse serves to communicate that Christ is indeed the Son of Man. This is one for Nicodemus to remember a few years from this time, when Christ does ascend.

This is not the first time that Christ uses His own future as evidence for His deity. Remember the cleansing, when he used His own resurrection as future evidence. Well, here we go again.

So, Christ will ascend, and it will mean this: that He descended from heaven at some time before. At this moment when Christ speaks to Nicodemus, He has already descended. Nicodemus alluded to it, but believed that Christ was just a man sent from God. Christ identifies Himself as the Son of Adam, who is the Son of God, and offers His future ascension as evidence for His present status.

John 1:14, "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up."

A comparison is drawn between a past event for Israel, and the necessity of a future event in the life of Christ.

Again this is the use of a future event for evidence of present status.

This event that Christ refers to is in Numbers 21:9. The setting is that of yet another rebellion by the children of Israel against Moses and against God. Specifically, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food."

The discipline for this complaining attitude was a plague of fiery serpents, which bit the Jews, many of whom died. The fiery term is most likely due to

a specific effect of the venom on the nervous system.

Well, with this kind of discipline, many of the Jews repented, and went before Moses to seek forgiveness, asking him to intercede on their behalf.

Moses went before God for his people, and so God forgave them. As a sign, God required Moses to make a fiery serpent of bronze and lift it up before the people so that if they looked at it they would live.

When people received a bite by a serpent they would look at the bronze serpent and be cured of the effects of the venom.

Moses' serpent was made of bronze to represent the judgment of God concerning this sin.

By looking at the serpent, an expression of belief was made. The kind of seeing here is the Hebrew word RA'AH, the equivalent of the Greek THEOREO, 'to behold'. The idea is looking with a desire to know. The pure motive is taken into account in the looking, and not everyone who glanced the way of the serpent would be healed of their sin and the discipline that accompanied it.

Now Christ would be lifted up on the cross.

John 1:15, "that whoever believes in Him might have eternal life."

This verse sets the standard for salvation unto eternal life.

Note that salvation is a direct result of the expression of human will.

The work is done; the son of man has been lifted up; we need only trust in that work. Not in what we do, or thing, or any kind of merit inherent in ourselves. Just Him, and more specifically the work done on the cross.

This is a purpose clause; the Son of man was lifted up on the cross so that we might believe, and no other reason. hina.

Notice that the adjective pas describes the universal condition for salvation, 'everyone who believes.' There is no exception, no amount or severity placed on sin, so that some of the worst who believe are excluded. Every one who

believes, without exception, without reference to what has gone in the past.

Next, is the Divine motive. Why has God chosen to forgive mankind, even the most sinful of men?

John 1:16, "For God so loved the world, so that He gave his only born Son, in order that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but might have eternal life."

The verse has three parts: the motivation of God, the resultant action, and the purpose of the action. Here begins a commentary by the writer of this gospel, and not the words of Christ Himself.

The 'might' here is dependent absolutely on human volition. The might is not, 'believe, and you might not perish', but you will not perish if you do

believe. It is not, 'Believe and you might have eternal life', but believe and you definitely will have it. The might is that the verse looks at the possibility from the viewpoint of human free will, not what God might do after the free will is expressed. This is a Greek third class condition, and it shows that if the condition is fulfilled, then always, always, the results will come to pass. Here, the condition is belief in Christ, and here, everyone who believes does not perish, but comes to have eternal life.

[For further exposition of John 3, see Pastor Perkins' study on The Person and Work of Christ, a Grace Notes study.]
