

The Night Visit, Part Two
John 3:1-3

Nicodemus, verse 1 says, was “a ruler of the Jews.” That is, he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the governing council of Israel. Government was controlled by Rome. But under the Romans, the Sanhedrin exercised a wide-range of power in civil, criminal, and religious matters.

The Sanhedrin had the authority to make arrests (Matthew 26:47, 57; Acts 4:1-3; 5:17-18) and the authority to conduct trials (Matthew 26:57; Acts 5:27). But the Sanhedrin did not have the power to carry out capital punishment (John 18:31). The right of capital punishment was reserved for Rome alone.

Due to the fact that Nicodemus was a member of this elite group of seventy-one men means that he was an outstanding person in the religion of the Jews. In fact, Jesus called him “a master of Israel.” This statement made by Jesus, was a statement that calls our attention to the fact that Nicodemus was considered “the teacher of Israel.” He was above reproach. He was highly educated. His reputation was well known. He was a leader of men.

And according to John 7:51, he believed in dealing honestly with the plain facts. In John 7:51 the colleagues of Nicodemus had already set in judgment on Jesus, but Nicodemus said to them, “Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth?” Nicodemus was this type of man, he was not controlled by prejudice, but he was controlled by truth.

Nicodemus had all that any man would want. But the all that he had was not enough. There was still something troubling him. His soul was hungry and thirsty, and this had troubled him for years.

When he heard Jesus speak and when he saw the miracles that Jesus did, he had to know more. He wanted to know more about this Teacher whom he had seen in Jerusalem. He knew that there was something different about Jesus. He knew that no mere mortal could have performed the things that he had seen Jesus do.

So Nicodemus takes a big risk in verse 2, he came to see Jesus. Verse 2 says, he “came to Jesus by night.”

The Scripture does not tell us why Nicodemus chose a night visit. There are three basic reasons given by some Bible scholars as to why Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. First, he did not want his coming to imply the approval of the entire Sanhedrin. Second, he did not want to risk incurring the disfavor of his colleagues. Third, nighttime would be more convenient because it would allow more time for conversation.

All three reasons are good reasons for the night visit by Nicodemus. But reason two best fits the text. He came by night because he did not want to risk incurring the disfavor of his colleagues. This I think best fits the text. The important point, however, is not when Nicodemus came, but that he came at all. Knowing his status, and his high rank within the Sanhedrin, this is rather amazing.

He was willing to risk all in order to have a conversation with Jesus. This is amazing. But not only is this amazing, it is important, because it shows us the depth of Nicodemus' anxiety. He was deeply troubled about something, or he would not have risked all to see Jesus.

But what was it that troubled him so deeply? Some have thought that God had convicted him that he was not ready for death. He was unprepared to meet God and he had sensed that for years – even though he was a good moral man and a good religious man, he feared death – he knew he was not ready to meet God. Now to some extent that is true, but I think with Nicodemus it goes much deeper than a fear of death.

After all, he was the best man (morally speaking) that religion could produce. He was the best man that education could produce. And he was the best man that culture could produce. No, I really don't think that Nicodemus feared death, even though he should have. I think that the text would have us to believe that Nicodemus felt very secure in his religion. And the thing that troubled him was the truth about Jesus – was Jesus the promised Messiah.

Jerry W. Arnold
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