

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

Gospel of John 3:1-12, ESV.

3 There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” ³ Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”

Gospel of John 7:50–52, ESV.

⁵⁰ Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and was one of them, said, ⁵¹ “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?”

Gospel of John 19:38–42, ESV.

³⁸ After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. ³⁹ Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. ⁴⁰ So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.

The journey.

One of the questions that I am most frequently asked as a reverend is why we have doubt about our faith. Wouldn't it be nice if having faith was an instantaneous, total, and permanent thing? The media makes it look that way. In a movie or a TV show, someone will suddenly become inspired during a church service, answer an altar call, and rush to the front of the church and fall on their knees to proclaim their faith. Or someone will be submerged in a pool of water, and then rise up, beaming in joy. These things do happen, and they are very good things. But the movie or the TV show does not show the rest of the story: the years-long, maybe decades-long search for true, deep, secure faith. Developing a close relationship with God, finding yourself guided through the pain we must experience in life – that takes some time and a lot of work. There are exceptions, of course; people who go from zero to sixty in 3.2 seconds and never look back. For most of us, though, we have many, many moments where we question our faith. Our society, by telling us that there is no God, that religion is foolish, makes it all the harder: we often must stand alone while we nurture our faith.

For me personally, I can't even tell you when my faith, in any concrete sense, matured. I was raised Christian. I am sure that my faith developed in a very typical fashion for my generation. I was blessed in that most of the people

around me were believers. When I was very small, I simply trusted in what I was told. God created everything. God created everything good. People brought evil into the world. God sent his son Jesus to Earth as the Christ, the anointed one, the savior. Christ Jesus, to use his title properly, taught us to treat all people as having been made in the image of God, to treat people with love, no matter their status in society. Jesus taught us to live with compassion and generosity, to be kind to those around us. Most of all, Jesus taught us to put our lives, our earthly and our eternal futures, in the hands of God. But yes, the day came when I became older and had to think for myself. That's when the real journey begins. I think that for me, it was early in high school. I was a good student, drawn to science and math and technology. I came of age in the early 70's, when many people were beginning to question faith. My peers in college certainly weren't hippies. That age was over. They all wanted to get degrees that would earn us high paying jobs and help us have comfortable, consumer-oriented lives. I was no longer surrounded by believers, by people who naturally supported my faith.

One incident particularly challenged my faith. I was in my mid-twenties, in graduate school. I had always worn a cross around my neck, all my life. One morning, I was running along the beach with a few friends from grad school. These were hardcore tech people who did not believe in God, or any kind of

afterlife, or that there was any greater authority than our civil authority. One of them noticed my cross and asked me why the hell I was wearing that. He said that the only people he knew who wore crosses were believers – and he said this sarcastically. Well, I did not take a strong stand for my faith. I wavered. I said that I was raised Catholic and had always worn a cross, that it was just something that I did. I added that I was a believer, but I said it weakly. My friends accepted this, but they certainly thought I was a little weird. I'll get back to this story.

We have three passages today. Note that they come from Chapters 3, 7, and 19 of the Gospel of John. They tell the story of Nicodemus, one of the seemingly minor characters in the New Testament, but someone who in truth, tells a very common faith story. He's important when it comes to understanding the journey of faith. Here's some background. Traditionally, the author of the Gospel has been thought to be John, one of the original twelve Apostles. It has a very different form and content from the other three Gospels. 90% of its material is unique, while the other three Gospels share a significant amount of content, including many passages that have almost identical wording. The Gospel of John is far more theological in nature, and in fact, its sophisticated nature has made many scholars question whether the uneducated Apostle John could have written it; perhaps it was authored by another person based on writings or oral reports of

John. It conflicts in some minor ways with the other three Gospels, by ordering incidents in Jesus' life differently. It does not include the parables of Jesus. But most importantly, it has a very specific focus. Rather than detailing the events of Jesus' life and quoting what he said, its purpose is to help us understand that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the Son of God, so that we can develop true faith. This gets us to the story of Nicodemus, who is a member of the rabbinical court called the Sanhedrin. He is a person who develops faith.

Nicodemus first appears in the third chapter of John. He comes to Jesus at night. Jesus' teachings and his "signs" (or miracles) have convinced Nicodemus that Jesus was indeed sent by God. He engages Jesus in conversation, whereby we come to a very famous passage about being born again: **3** *There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." ³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. You must be born again."* Nicodemus wants to understand more of what

Jesus has to say, but he is in a difficult position. As a leading member of the Sanhedrin, he needs to be careful: the Sanhedrin vehemently opposes Jesus. They are the ones who eventually plot the death of Jesus. They rebuke the Apostles Peter and John for witnessing to Jesus. They also sentence Stephen to be stoned to death. And they viciously interrogate the Great Evangelist Paul. No wonder Nicodemus came to Jesus secretly, at night. Notice, though, that Nicodemus calls Jesus Rabbi, or “teacher”: this is a great sign of respect. Jesus’ challenge to Nicodemus, that he needs to be “born again” through the Holy Spirit, is echoed in other books of the New Testament, including Titus and 1st Peter. In 1st Peter, Chapter 1, we read: ²²*Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart,* ²³*since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.* Nicodemus is in the process of being made imperishable.

But here is something very important. There is no indication, zero evidence, that Nicodemus becomes a follower of Jesus that night. In fact, he finds Jesus’ teachings to be confusing. But Jesus clearly touches Nicodemus’ heart on that first night. In Chapter 7, probably two years later, when Jesus is well into his ministry, Nicodemus is arguing against condemning Jesus without a proper trial. Jesus has been teaching at the Temple and people are accepting him as the Messiah. The

Pharisees and other religious leaders want Jesus arrested. They consider the people who follow Jesus to be fools and they openly curse them. Here is what we read: ⁵⁰ *Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and was one of them, said,* ⁵¹ *“Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?”* Nicodemus has not yet broken from the Sanhedrin. It has been a couple of years, and it’s clear that Nicodemus is secretly developing faith in Jesus Christ.

Then, another year or so goes by; Jesus is at the end of his life. He has been sentenced to death. Pilate has had him flogged. He is crucified and dies. It is time to bury Jesus. We read this: ³⁸ *After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body.* ³⁹ *Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight.* ⁴⁰ *So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.* At this time and place, people were often put in an above ground tomb, and then later, when all that was left were the bones, they were buried in a small box. The 75 pounds of extremely expensive ointment that Nicodemus very openly brings to other believers to put on Jesus’ body, to cover the smell of decay and thereby show respect for Jesus, tells us how much Nicodemus’ faith has grown.

I can't tell you when became fully confident of wearing a cross openly, of identifying myself as a person of faith to those around me. I work in a very secular hospital now, in a city that is not known for its Christian population. But sometime during my years as a professor, I became more confident in my faith. I started wearing my cross outside my shirt. I switched from a very small cross to a big one. I added to my chain a bunch of old saint medals that I had in a drawer. When people asked me if I was a Christian, I said yes, very much. I even started educating people around me, talking about the structure and the meaning of the Bible. Christian students found out about me and sought me out. If I had to put my finger on exactly what caused me to go from Nicodemus the inquisitive to Nicodemus the true, open follower of Christ, I would have to say that it was gradual, that there absolutely was no definitive event. Nicodemus showed a lot of courage by standing up to those who held power over him and questioning their justification for having Jesus Christ arrested and executed. Perhaps he would have pointed back at that event and said that his faith was solidified then. But for me, let me introduce you to a mathematical term, in case you don't already know it. The Greek letter *delta*, the capital of which looks like a triangle, is used to represent a change in something. A delta is usually a measurable change like going from fifty to sixty miles per hour. But there is another Greek letter, epsilon, which looks like a small E, and I am being

a bit superficial here, but it basically means a change that is so extremely tiny that it isn't measurable. Maybe the way I changed wasn't in nice big measurable deltas where I moved from having very limited faith to having great faith. It might be best to say that over the decades, I experienced countless epsilons that eventually took me to true faith. It was extremely gradual, with no point at which I could say that I transitioned in any true, measurable fashion. I imagine that's how Nicodemus' faith grew. I also imagine that like me, he never stopped having doubts.

We must do the things that nudge us along that path. We need to pray to God, read Scripture, and look toward God to guide us when we have Red Sea moments. We must avoid pressuring ourselves to have gigantic ah-ah moments where suddenly everything falls into place. By keeping God in our minds, by looking to God for support, by looking to our faith for solutions, that is how we do what Nicodemus did. Most importantly, we need to remember the biggest of the lessons Jesus taught us – to treat all people with love and to seek peace at all times. True faith is expressed with compassion. Please pray very briefly with me.

God, we live every day in doubt about our futures, about what could happen tomorrow. Help us trust you to guide us through whatever happens in life. Most of all, guide us down that path where we oh-so-slowly develop true faith in you. Amen.