

Hindsight is 20/20 wk 4: Nicodemus

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One of the growing trends in the movies, really in all of story-telling is called an “origin story.” Many of our most popular books and movies may have run their course, but the origin stories –the “prequels” help us get to know the characters even better and sometimes provide insight for why they did something in a story that we’ve already seen but now we get it.

The Marvel, Star Wars, Harry Potter, and Lord of the Rings franchises have all given us these origin stories. These origin stories are essentially the gift of hindsight. They help us see stories we know and characters we love in a deeper way.

This series that we are in to kick off our year is called Hindsight is 20/20 because there are often things that we just don’t see clearly until we are on the other side of them. Each of us will have a different story for how we got here, but the big idea that I want us to hold on to in this series is that **Jesus redeems our pasts and changes our futures.**

For some of us there was a dramatic moment of time and from that time we’ve never been the same. Some of us have been in some really dark places and until we take the time to reflect on where we’ve been we don’t get a full appreciation for the ways that God has been active in our stories up to this point.

The first 3 weeks we’ve talked about people whose change has been marked for us by a name change. For 2 of these guys Jesus may not have changed their names, but the names they are known by are definitely due to their path with Jesus. We’ve talked about Matthew – who was also known as Levi. He was a man who would have been voted least likely to be a disciple of Jesus in the beginning. Because of his vocation he was probably wealthy and isolated from the religious- yet Jesus extended the same call to him as he did his other disciples, “Come, follow me.”

Peter, who’s name had been Simon-but Jesus changed his name and his vocation; and then reconciled him and gave him a lead role in the church after he had abandoned Jesus hours before his crucifixion.

We looked at how we know the Apostle Paul by that name mostly because of his influence on the Gentile church – which was probably the craziest idea you could have told Saul the Pharisee before he met Jesus and had his worldview totally changed.

Today we are going to look at someone that we really don't know that much about, even though the most famous verse in the Bible is found in the section that introduces us to him. He is only mentioned in the Gospel of John and only 3 times. One of the interesting things about that is that in the 2nd and 3rd times he is mentioned-the first encounter is noted.

The man's name is Nicodemus and we meet him in John 3.

Before we get to chapter 3 we need to see it in the context of what John has told us so far. John begins his gospel with some descriptive language trying to explain the incarnation of Jesus. That he was God from the beginning and that he had come in the flesh.

He tells us about Jesus' baptism and the calling of his disciples along with the turning water to wine as his first public miracle. Chapter 2 John tells us about Jesus' first trip to Jerusalem for Passover with his disciples. Jesus creates quite a stir at the temple by driving out the money changers and Jesus foretells of his death for the first time – telling them that if they destroy this temple he will raise it again in 3 days.

Throughout the narrative – really through the entire Gospel of John, John will cut in and tell you some things –like things they didn't understand at the time, but did after he raised from the dead...

The point so far is that Jesus is making some pretty heady claims and he did some miraculous things that turned a lot of heads, including the Pharisees who were the religious leaders and saw themselves of the keepers of true Judaism.

Here came Jesus doing undeniable things but he was so much different than the Pharisees. He was not what the religious expected. And that brings us to a really important question when we come to Jesus; **What do we do, when Jesus acts contrary to your expectations?**

This happens all the time – sometimes in desperation people have come to church or decided to follow Jesus because somewhere they believe that if they are good with Jesus that whatever their particular issue is-it will get better.

I have had conversations with believers or former believers who are struggling because even though they've followed Jesus, someone they loved still died, or a marriage fell apart and they don't know what to do with Jesus when he doesn't do what they expect him to do.

This is where Nicodemus is-how could he reconcile what he was seeing and hearing of Jesus with what he knew had to be true of the Messiah?

So he goes to see him-he wants to ask some questions...but he never really asks.

John 3:1-2 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night. We don't exactly know why he came at night. Some speculate that it was to spy on Jesus or challenge him, but from what we see in other places most of the Pharisees wanted to put on a show in their challenging of Jesus.

My guess is that he came at night because he didn't want others to see. It could be that he didn't want his fellow Pharisees to hear about him going to Jesus as they may have seen it as some type of betrayal. Maybe he didn't want the people who knew him as a teacher going to see another teacher because it would seem that he didn't have all the answers he claimed to have.

So under cover of darkness, he comes to Jesus and says "we know" – without saying who we is... is he speaking for other Pharisees? Or does he want it to sound like more than just him? We know that you are from God...it's a statement but there's an implied question and it's a version of the one I started with – we know God sent you, but why aren't you like we expected?

Jesus' response – **John 3:3 Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."**

The answer to the question is that to see kingdom things, you have to have kingdom thinking – You can't see what's right in front of you Nicodemus until you shed the misconceptions you are bringing into this and start over.

Nicodemus' answer can come off like he isn't very bright-not picking up on a metaphor, but keep in mind Jesus is going to call him Israel's teacher. He was a rabbi-stories, and metaphors and illustrations are in his wheelhouse. His response I think is more about him thinking he's too old to have a change of mind...surely he can't have spent his life looking at this wrong, so he blurts out – **John 3:4 How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"**

John 3:5-8 Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit[b] gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You[c] must be born again.' 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

This water that Jesus is referencing-especially on the heels of what John tells us in the previous 2 chapters is the baptism of John, this repentance of Sin. When we repent and acknowledge we've gone wrong we are on the edge of God having His way in us-the Spirit can have its way.

Nicodemus' response – How can this be?

John 3:10-15 You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? 11 Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. 12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? 13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

Jesus is talking to a teacher of the Law – he knows his Israelite history. This story he is referencing is from Numbers 21. In it, God has Moses make a bronze snake to lift up on a pole, so that the people who were being bit by poisonous snakes would be healed. He is alluding to his death on the cross – a long time before it would happen and I'm sure Nicodemus is puzzled at that part of the answer.

But what would have been clear to him was Jesus' claim of being the Son of Man – which was a title found often in the book of Daniel and him saying that he had come from heaven.

Nicodemus doesn't try to stone him as a heretic, but he is no doubt puzzled and still curious.

The rest of that section is the famous part – we don't know, for a couple of reasons, the first that there are no quotation marks in Greek (or red letters) and because of John's habit of coming in and out of the story he tells if Jesus said the next few verses. Because of the way he is going to talk about light and darkness, I tend to think this is John making sure we get the message that Jesus was explaining to Nicodemus. It deals with the purpose and scope of his mission.

So after Jesus draws the comparison to the story in Numbers saying that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life, John pivots to make sure we get the point.

John 3:16-21 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. 19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

Draw out a couple of things – First John gives us the motive – **God loves the world.**

Nicodemus needed to hear the word “everyone” – and we need to wrap ourselves around that as well. Whether we like to admit it or not, there are people that we just think God can’t possibly love, or at least not as much as us? There’s a class of people-a sin, a race – a political party – that we kind of dismiss. We may not even realize it – we’re like “ok, God loves everybody” but wink wink- we know.

One of the reasons we struggle with that is we know that we are supposed to follow his example and we just don’t want to.

Adam – Luke 14 teaching about everyone welcome at the table – wanted to encourage a young man to think about who might be left out of his circle, that he could invite...thought of someone then said, “no he’s too annoying.” Adam says – no, that’s exactly who you need to invite.

Siblings were getting together to leave and Adam reminds the kid to be sure and invite so and so next week – siblings – “Not him! He’s so annoying!” Adam says – it didn’t take, let’s try it again- “no we get it, but he’s annoying...” Don’t get it.

God loving the world is amazing news because it included you! Don’t forget his motive of love.

Second thing to point out – vs 17 – the point isn’t to condemn but to save...

This gets twisted in our world a lot – think that God is wanting to condemn everyone to hell. He’s provided a way to life, a way that we could not do on our own or deserve... Some want to complain that there aren’t lots of ways – But God has made a way and he’s raised up his son to prove it.

The question Nicodemus faced was what was he going to do about it. He had come under the cover of darkness-and John paints this picture of moving into the light, in front of God and everybody...

The next time Nicodemus is mentioned is in John 7. The Pharisees has tried to get the Temple guard to arrest Jesus but they didn't. They had been swayed by listening to Jesus teach and the Pharisees are angry about it and want Jesus dead. But Nicodemus is one of them and he is there.

John 7:50-52 Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, 51 "Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?" 52 They replied, "Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee."

John reminds us this guy came to see Jesus at night – now he's in a spot. What will he do? He speaks up, at least mildly and they mock him – the Galilee quip –is like calling someone a hillbilly.

We don't know what Nicodemus does with their response. John doesn't mention him again until after Jesus has been crucified. Then he appears with Joseph of Arimathea to claim Jesus' body and bury him.

John 19:38-40 Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. 39 He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds.[e] 40 Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs.

Make no mistake, this is a big step for both Joseph and Nicodemus. We don't know if Nicodemus had been part of the trial, if he had tried to stop it...but we know that he's there giving Jesus a proper burial in the face of what his peers had done. This would be a defining moment. There would be no going back to the Sanhedrin. He would lose prestige and there's a good chance that he would have lost a lot of his wealth.

But Nicodemus – probably had looked back on that night talking to Jesus countless times. Jesus wasn't who he expected and he didn't do what Nicodemus

thought he should; but I wonder if in hindsight Nicodemus wishes he could go back to that night and make a choice to follow Jesus then.

Each of us has a daily choice-will we live in a way that others know we follow Jesus? Will we settle for social media posts and platitudes or will we enlarge our circles for “everyone?”

Will you live your life differently because Jesus was lifted up?