

Savoring God's Word

A Meditation on John 3:1-17

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This meditation exercise on John 3:1-17 is especially for those wishing to make progress in the spiritual life. Perhaps you want to let God change you.

If you wish to have a group meditate on the passage together, the instructions for the group leader are in italics. If you wish to use it alone, ignore those instructions. This meditation roughly follows the pattern of *lectio divina*, but also includes elements from the Ignatian style of Scripture meditation. For more information about how to meditate on Scripture, see *Savoring God's Word* or CD *Meditating on Scripture* (scroll to the bottom).

WARMING UP (5-10 minutes)

Begin each session by quieting yourself in silence. To help center yourself, try the following:

- Breathe in and out deeply five or six times. Relax your neck and move it around. Then let your arms go limp and relax the legs and ankles. Relax each part from the inside out.
- Use the palms up, palms down method described in the introduction to turn your distractions over to God. (Rest your hands in your lap, placing the palms down whenever you think of concerns you need to turn over to God. Turn your palms up as a symbol of your desire to receive from the Lord.)

Then ask yourself the following question to focus your thoughts for the meditation: Both Mary and Nicodemus asked this important question: "How can this be?" What question would you like to ask God? If you can't think of one now, that's fine. Try to simply quiet yourself.

Group leader: After your group has had a chance to greet each other, read the centering instructions above (see bullets). Then ask the above "quiet question." Sit quietly together for two minutes or so and repeat the question. Then ask group members to share their thoughts in only a sentence or two. Remind group members they may pass if they wish. After group members share, thank them and comment that it's helpful to hear the variety of ways that God speaks to people.

READING the PASSAGE (15-20 minutes)

If you have read about Nicodemus before, set aside what you've heard about him or the central idea of the passage. Read the passage silently, trying to hear it as if you've never heard it before. Note the explanations on the right as you read along or at the end.

Group leader: Ask a group member to read the passage below aloud. Suggest that other group members might want to close their eyes and listen.

JOHN 3

1 Now there was a man of the *Pharisees* named Nicodemus, a member of the *Jewish ruling council*.

NICODEMUS ADMITS JESUS IS ONTO SOMETHING

2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." 3 In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the *kingdom of God* unless he is born again."

NICODEMUS ASKS QUESTIONS

4 "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

5 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the *kingdom of God* unless he is *born of water* and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You 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*."

9 "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

JESUS EXPLAINS ETERNAL LIFE

10 "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these 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 desert*, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. 16 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.

ITALICIZED WORDS & PHRASES

PHARISEES This powerful group of religious experts was created to reform society from its wrongs. They were strict, considering certain traditions to be equally authoritative with the law and they sometimes overemphasized these traditions. Later in Jesus' ministry, he criticized them harshly (Matt. 23).

JEWISH RULING COUNCIL This probably refers to the Sanhedrin, a council of 70 elders who ruled the Jewish people. As a whole, this council hated Jesus and considered him an impostor.

KINGDOM of GOD: God's rule on earth, beginning with Jesus' coming, continuing through the present and into the future.

BORN of WATER: This could refer to physical childbirth ("breaking of water") or Christian baptism, or perhaps both.

BORN of the SPIRIT: This could refer to a beginning of spiritual awareness or to a continual awakening to God.

SON of MAN: A phrase from the Old Testament that Jesus used to describe Himself as the Messiah promised by Daniel (Dan. 7:13).

JUST AS MOSES . . . : In Old Testament times, poisonous snakes infested the Israelites' camp. Israelites could be saved by looking at a bronze snake that Moses lifted up (Num. 21:8-9).

If you haven't read the notes in the right column, read them silently now. Take a minute to consider the following questions.

Group leader: After the passage is read, ask group members to read silently the explanations in the right column and then to jot down answers to the questions below. After a few minutes, have them choose one question and share their answer to that question in a sentence or two. Or they may pass, if they wish. Explain that this is not a time for discussion, but for reporting responses to the questions.

NICODEMUS

1. How would you describe Nicodemus based on these actions:

- Even though Nicodemus was a Jewish leader, he was willing to go outside established opinion and to approach Jesus with several How-can-this-be type questions (vs. 4, 9).
 - ☐ curious
 - ☐ truth-seeker
 - ☐ bold enough to ask
 - ☐ testing Jesus
 - ☐ belligerent
 - ☐ persistent
 - ☐ other: _____
- Nicodemus responded to Jesus' statements with more questions and confusion. Why do you think he did that ? Because he was . . .
 - ☐ humble
 - ☐ obtuse
 - ☐ literal-minded
 - ☐ appalled
 - ☐ trying to misunderstand
 - ☐ other: _____

JESUS

2. How would you describe Jesus, based on these actions:

- Jesus' willingness to talk with Nicodemus
 - ☐ approachable, ready to be asked questions
 - ☐ available for one-on-one conversation
 - ☐ not easily intimidated by authority
 - ☐ other: _____
- Jesus' expectations, perhaps frustration, expressed in this phrase: "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things?" (vs. 10)
 - ☐ unimpressed with the scholarship of the Pharisees
 - ☐ unimpressed by the Pharisees' grasp of spiritual issues
 - ☐ expecting Nicodemus to understand too much
 - ☐ challenging Nicodemus to dig deeper
 - ☐ other: _____

SYMBOLS

3. Which of the images Jesus used is most helpful to you? Put a check mark by that one.

- ☐ *water and birth* to illustrate how spiritual transformation and renewal occur
- ☐ *wind* to illustrate how the Spirit moves in the world
- ☐ *raising the bronze snake* to symbolize how people must know him as Messiah for belief to occur

Which image, if any, invite you to ponder it more fully? Put a question mark by that one.

If any of the above questions are too difficult, hold them before God for a few minutes and then go on. Don't worry about getting an answer, but be open to what may come to you in the next few days.

PICTURING the PASSAGE (10-15 minutes)

Before reading the passage again, consider these cues. Let them help you picture how this event in Scripture might have occurred.

CHARACTER CUE: NICODEMUS, THE PHARISEE

Even though Nicodemus was a Pharisee (the political party of reformers and good-deed-doers), he was also humble and sensitive to truth. This event occurred early in Jesus' three-year ministry, and so Nicodemus may not have witnessed any of Jesus' miracles. He may have been confused about who Jesus was, yet his confusion did not lead to him to name-calling and faulty generalizations. It led him to seek Jesus out.

CHARACTER CUE: JESUS, THE ENEMY OF THE PHARISEES

Jesus later accused the Pharisees of hypocrisy (doing great deeds but overlooking the inner person), but he didn't level such a charge at Nicodemus. Jesus did, however, question Nicodemus and stretch him as he did with His disciples and does with people today.

SETTING CUES: WHERE DID THEY TALK?

Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night, presumably because he didn't want to be seen by other leaders. His intense discussion with Jesus appears to have been private and may have taken place by lamplight or perhaps out in the night air. Several paintings show them talking on a flat rooftop -- a logical place to meet at night. There was often an upper room built on the flat roof where they may have also met in private.

Now read the passage aloud and picture the events as if they were a movie playing in your mind. Imagine the scent of oil in the air from the lamp, or the moistness of an evening walk. It was a spring evening and perhaps Nicodemus became anxious for sun set, knowing what he had in mind.

{Graphic: lamp-- they looked like candy dishes with oil and were often set in the wall to avoid being turned over. It would be great to have two men talking in front of the light. p. 311--Beers}

Group leader: Have group members read the above cues silently. Then have a group member read the passage aloud while the others picture the passage.

SOAKING in the PASSAGE (5-15 minutes)

Consider now the all-important question that should be addressed whenever Scripture is read: How is my life touched today by this passage?

Read the passage aloud again and ponder the following question for about five minutes:
What word or phrase or scene or image emerges from the passage and stays with you? If you latch on to something right away, set that aside for a minute and see if anything else emerges.

Here are some examples of moments, scenes, or images:

- ☐ hearing the wind blow as Jesus talked about the Spirit
- ☐ Nicodemus' desire to understand when he asked, How can this be? (vs. 9)
- ☐ phrases (circle one): kingdom of God, Spirit gives birth to Spirit, lifted up

After a few minutes, write about the word, phrase, scene or image that resonates within you from the passage.

Word or phrase _____

I hear . . . or, I see . . . _____

Group leader: Have a different group member read the passage aloud and then state the question printed in bold. Have the group sit together quietly and then fill in one of the blanks above. After a few minutes, ask each group member to read what they've written. Remind group members that they may pass if they wish.

PONDERING the INVITATION (5-15 minutes)

Perhaps God is offering you an invitation of some kind through this passage -- perhaps not for a long-term project, but for something you need to do in the next day or two. What might that be? Sit quietly for a few minutes, pondering this question: **What do I sense this passage calling me to do or be?** If nothing comes, that's fine. Watch for insights in the next few days, but for now, simply sit in the quiet and enjoy God's presence.

Group leader: Read the above instructions aloud and after a few minutes, repeat the question printed in bold. Ask group members to respond by saying, I SENSE THIS PASSAGE CALLING ME TO: and then completing that statement with a short phrase. Anyone who wishes to pass may do so. Encourage them to listen respectfully and prayerfully to other group members.

PRAYING (5-10 minutes)

Take a few minutes to respond to God about this meditation. **How do you feel about what you sensed (or didn't sense)? What is it you most want to say to God at this time?**

Group leader: After allowing a few minutes for private prayer, ask group members to pray for the person on their left. Anyone wishing to pray silently may do so, saying, "I'm praying silently." When they're finished, they can say, "Amen."

DAILY LECTIO:

If you wish, use the above format to meditate on God's word between group meetings. You may wish to focus on today's passage everyday this week (try using a different version of the Bible besides NIV) or use the following passages:

- Deuteronomy 4:29 (finding God when you look for him with all your heart and soul)
- John 12:24-26 (dying to self)
- Romans 12:2 (being transformed)
- 1 Corinthians 15:45-50 (the necessity of being born again)
- 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 (focusing on the unseen)
- 1 Peter 1:20-23 (the difference being born again makes)

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