

## NICODEMUS AT NIGHT

We were all shocked to hear about the tragic death of Steve Irwin, the Crocodile Hunter. We were stunned, not that he died, for he faced tremendous dangers on a daily basis. We were, rather, surprised by the way that he died. About the only way that a stingray could kill by stabbing directly in the heart with his barbed spine. Who would have thought that the great Crocodile Hunter would die this way? If ever we expected him to have a great injury we would think it would be his leg, his hand, or maybe his head, but no, it was his heart!

We begin a new series called “Conversations With Jesus.” The first has to do with Jesus and the issues of the heart—Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus at night.

“There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. John 3:1. Having been born into the nation of Israel and belonging to the Pharisaic sect, Nicodemus naturally considered himself one of the elect and saved. He was one of the strict Calvinists of his day. He believed in predestination.

He was very much concerned about the condition of the church in his day. He didn’t like the trends that he saw in the lowered standards, the lax piety, the poor attendance at church. He longed for something that would change the spiritual direction of the people. He saw the liberal spirit of the Sadducees and Herodians with their political alliances and cozying up with the politicians for power. Nicodemus despised this hypocritical game being played by his fellow countrymen.

He had heard of John the Baptist’s successful campaign out by the Jordan River in which many had been induced to be baptized for the repentance of sins. John had proclaimed the soon coming Messiah.

When Nicodemus witnessed Jesus throw the merchandisers out of the Temple precincts, this was just the sort of thing that stirred his heart, for he too was concerned about such corrupting practices. He determined to have an interview with Jesus, but dare not do it when others might see him with Jesus. It might set a bad example for them. So he—

“. . . Came to Jesus by night, and said unto Him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.” John 3:2. Nicodemus determined to see Jesus under cover of darkness. Such a

clandestine meeting would conceal whatever sympathies he might have for this Reformer. He addressed Jesus as a Teacher from God, but in no way acknowledged Him as the Messiah, much less the Son of God. Nicodemus, did not appreciate the divine character of Jesus, but thought Him to be a mere man. He sought to flatter Him as a miracle worker.

Human nature was the same two thousand years ago that it is today. Nicodemus opened his conversation with the Lord in the same way that men now greet a preacher. "Ah, doctor, that sermon just suited me; it was just what I have always believed." The height of some people's religion seems to be attained in complimenting the preacher. "An able man; preaches just what I believe." It is well to encourage a minister, as well as any other laborer; but the best encouragement any true minister of the Gospel can receive is to see the truths that he presents accepted and put into practice.

We have no reason to doubt the sincerity of the words of Nicodemus. But Jesus Himself knew that He had come from God, even though every man denied it; and so He did not need any assurance from men, to encourage Him; He therefore ignored the compliment, and came straight to realities: "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." John 3:3.

Nicodemus was willing enough to acknowledge that Jesus was a Teacher come from God, yet as soon as Jesus brought the truth home to his own heart, laying bare its need, he was irritated, and began to argue with the Master. "Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" John 3:4. So far as Nicodemus was concerned this talk of being born again in his mother's womb was so ridiculous as to not even deserve discussion. Don't even go there.

It reminds me of reading about the Chevy Nova. It was a relatively successful American car for many years. Encouraged by U.S. sales, Chevrolet began to market the American Nova throughout the world. Unfortunately, the Nova did not sell well in Mexico and other Latin American countries. Additional ads were ordered, marketing efforts were stepped up, but sales remained stagnant. Sales directors were baffled. The car had sold well in the American market; why wasn't it selling now? When they discovered the answer, it was rather embarrassing: In Spanish, Nova means "no go."

This was the case with Nicodemus. He was saying to Jesus, "Don't go there." There was never a teacher so great, nor clothed with so

great authority nor such good credentials, that men would not argue with Him about that of which He is Master, and they know nothing, if it does not coincide with their preconceived ideas, or with their practices. Indeed, the teacher from God is really the only one whose words are challenged to any great extent. When a man comes talking words of his own imagination, the multitude are ready to receive him without any protest.

Nicodemus knew something of what it means to be born again because when one became a part of the Jewish religion they underwent a change and transformation. But since Nicodemus was already saved he considered he didn't need such regeneration.

The new birth is necessary, not merely that one may enter heaven, but that one may be a Christian. In order to belong to that kingdom, or even to see it, a person must be made over entirely new; he must be a new creature, fashioned and controlled wholly by the Spirit of God. "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His." Romans 8:9.

Nicodemus was familiar with what Jesus was talking about. "Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." John 3:5. He had witnessed John's baptism. He knew of the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. He now realized he was in the presence of greatness and must assume the role of pupil to Master Teacher.

Here Jesus teaches two births. One is physical birth from one's mother, the other is a Divine birth by the Spirit from above. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." John 3:6. Both are supernatural in that God's creative power is their source.

But "the flesh is flesh," and Jesus is not speaking about an evil body and faulty instruments with which we are born. It is rather a "law of sin" which we inherit from Adam through our parents which corrupts our fallen, sinful nature. It is this nature which stands condemned and must die. It produces a world of men who are filled with hearts of stone.

It was 103°F in Hell Creek, South Dakota, one day in September 1993. Dinosaur hunter Michael Hammer was amazed at what he saw. Sticking out of the ground were the remains of a *Thescelosaurus*, a plant-eating dinosaur. The skeleton was almost complete. Hammer says he knew right away that it was "very special." Scientists reported

that inside the dinosaur's chest was what seems to be a stone heart—the first dinosaur heart ever seen.

Having a stone heart is not a good thing. A song line goes: "Don't you wish sometimes you had a heart made of stone?" Having a heart made of stone is not exactly something we should long for.

A mafia chief Michael Corleone meets with Cardinal Lamberto, reporting to the Cardinal that executives from the Vatican bank and even an Archbishop, have been involved in a massive case of fraud. After hearing this news Cardinal Lamberto moves to a fountain, withdraws a stone and says: Look at this stone. It has been lying in the water for a very long time, but the water has not penetrated it." He breaks the stone in two, shows the inside to Don Michael and continues, "Look. Perfectly dry. The same thing has happened to men in Europe. For centuries they have been surrounded by Christianity, but Christ has not penetrated. Christ doesn't breathe within them."

That Jesus would speak of such a rebirth from "flesh" to Spirit to a religious man like Nicodemus, could easily be mistaken as an insult to his highly refined piety. It is just the case that Jesus reinforced to this matter with the highly educated Pharisee. He said: "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again." John 3:7.

No one doubts that a gambler, an addict, a cussing longshoreman, a shooter, a family abuser, a prostitute, etc. needs to be born again; but does a Ph.D. in religion need it? Surely not! But, indeed, a religious person needs to be born again even more so. Those who think that God is on their side have been some of the worst Inquisitors and tyrants in Christian history. They have a righteous cause and can do no wrong. How much do such persons need to be humbled and brought under the controlling power of God?

Sabbath-school teachers need to be born again. The elders of the church need it. The church board needs the Holy Spirit. The deacons and deaconesses need a spiritual regeneration and empowerment of the Spirit of service. The spiritual condition of a church can rise no higher than the leadership. If a church is in an impoverished state it may well be due to the poor example they are receiving from their leadership?

Now Jesus explains the source of this new life to Nicodemus. "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit." John 3:8.

Surprising as it may seem, the Good News is very good: (a) the Holy Spirit does the new-birth work, and (b) He will do it if you don't frustrate Him. That "wind" is forever blowing seeds of heavenly truth into minds and hearts. No one is wise enough to tell where they come from, for the grace of God has been working on human hearts in multitudinous ways ever since time began. What parents have said, friends, songs of praise, Bible messages heard or read, sermons, expressions of true love—all can be ways that the Holy Spirit uses to plant "Good News" ideas in the heart.

These "seeds" may lie there deep, unrecognized for years, but they are certain to germinate because each one has within itself the mysterious principle of eternal life. Each "seed" of Good News truth "is the power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16).

Christ's illustration of the wind blowing "wherever it pleases" is a picture of God's compassionate concern for every person. As surely as you have felt the wind blowing on your cheek, so surely is the Holy Spirit trying to convert you. "God does not show favoritism" (Acts 10:34, NIV).

It's exciting, for at times you can almost feel those seeds of truth germinating within your soul like a pregnant woman can feel the baby growing within her. She is thrilled with new life forming. What greater joy to experience something even more wonderful—"I'm being born again!"

"Nicodemus answered and said unto Him, How can these things be?" John 3:9. Nicodemus was incredulous. It was as though the Saviour was giving him a new paradigm of truth which just didn't compute with his old view of how things worked. He was in a state of confusion. He was like so many today who say, "Don't confuse me with the truth. I have it all figured out in my own mind, now don't confuse me with the facts."

"Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?" John 3:10. Nicodemus, you've gone to divinity school. You should know these things. Didn't they teach you about this in "Judaism 101"?

Now where will Jesus go from here with Nicodemus? How will He break through his hardened shell? Jesus loves Nicodemus with an unfettered *agape*. How can He draw him? How can He reach beneath his professorial façade? How can he get beyond this professional relationship of one colleague speaking to another colleague? Jesus wants to be Nicodemus' true friend: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We

“speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness.” John 3:11. Who is this “we” of whom Jesus speaks?

Surely it must be “God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort” 1 Corinthians 1:3. It must be “the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost” John 14:26. The great tri-unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are witnessing to Nicodemus’ heart. Their witness is true.

As Creator of the wind He directs its course and velocity. “If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?” John 3:12. Meteorologists do not create the weather, they only predict it based on computer models. It is still not an exact science, but probabilities based on past experience. But God knows where the wind comes from and where it is going.

Likewise, the Holy Wind of God blows from the heavenly sanctuary and it is continuously rushing and moving upon the hearts of men and women. It moves upon your heart too, dear one. When that sweet conviction grips your mind do not brush it away as just a tender personal moment of self-awareness. Rather know that its origin is from above. God loves you. That conviction of sin is from above. Turn from your sin in repentance toward God.

“But that’s my problem: I don’t know how to believe. I was born and bred in unbelief.” Wait a moment: God has already given you “a measure of faith” (Rom. 12:3), the gift of believing; no one can ever say that God has deprived him of faith! He has given you exactly the amount you need for eternal salvation. Now, choose to believe.

To “believe” in Christ is to let one’s little shriveled up selfish heart be “enlarged” and “quickened” (made alive) to at least begin to “comprehend” the “breadth, and length, and depth, and height” of the love of Christ which “passes knowledge” (Psalm 119:25, 32; Eph. 3:14-21).

It’s painful, not because the Lord wants to hurt us, but because we have been “brought forth in iniquity” (Psalm 51:5, “shapen” in it, KJV), and every cell of our souls is egocentric in its being. You sit with legs crossed, your leg “goes to sleep,” you lose consciousness in it, it feels as though it is not there; then when it begins to “awake” it tingles with painful feelings. When you’re being converted, you’re being “born again” and it tingles with painful feelings; it’s always painful to be “born,” much nicer to stay snug and cozy in mother’s womb.

But your Creator and Savior says No, come out into the world and face Reality; be what you are; share life with its Author. The New

Covenant gospel assures you that even though you have left the “womb,” you are still as secure in the battlefields of life as if you were still in the womb. The Lord assures you, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ So we may boldly say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?’” (Heb. 13:5, 6). So, now instead of cozying up in the “womb” you are living by faith. Exciting, but it’s living with Christ. To refuse to be “born” is therefore the sin of unbelief.

Then Jesus gave Nicodemus a marvelous lesson from the Old Testament which foreshadowed His cross. “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up.” John 3:14. This was for the very purpose of letting Nicodemus know that he was filled with the venom of sin, just as bitten with it as were his ancient ancestors in the wilderness, when they were bitten by the serpents because of their unbelief. They would have surely died had not a remedy been posted by Moses lifting up a brazen serpent. They were commanded to look and live! Why look at that which had fatally wounded them?

Why should Nicodemus look at Jesus who was so marred by the sin which He took upon Himself that no one outwardly would recognize His visage as being the Divine Son of God? It was repulsive to look upon a victim of crucifixion. All that blood, and gore, and guts caused one instinctively to look away and shutter in horror. But to look at Christ crucified was to look into the eyes of Infinite love which bore his sins. But for Christ the sinner would be in his rightful place, on the cross to die eternally.

So as repulsive as it might be to look at Christ crucified was to begin to understand the length and breadth, the height and depth of God’s love in Christ for the sinner. Such an appreciation of God’s *agape* would awaken in the heart a reciprocating love responsive to God. God’s love creates love in the very stronghold of our selfish hearts.

Christ lifted up Himself as crucified before Nicodemus that He might draw Him with the cords of love. In so doing, He proclaims Himself to us as lifted up for our sins, too.

He lived three years in hell, going from therapy to therapy, fighting every day for survival, but finally in 1999 he made it: His diagnosis said he was free of cancer. In one of the most amazing moments in sports history, he started training again and with the mentality of a warrior he surprises the world. Only one year after the end of his treatment, Lance Armstrong became the absolute winner of the most physically exhausting sport in the world: the 2,290-mile Tour De

France. Then many people said it was pure luck but next year the warrior proved them wrong. He went on, writing history, by winning cycling's most prestigious competition for *six more times* in the row. He became, the only person that has ever won the Tour De France for seven consecutive times. He came back from certain death.

Jesus died an eternal death upon His cross and lived to tell about it. When you experience the new birth your old sinful nature dies with Christ on the cross. You reckon yourself to be dead with Him. He raises you up in newness of life to keep under your old nature that you might live His new resurrection life. That sin which had been eating away at your life destined to destroy you, has been crucified. You now have Jesus new principle of life working in you.

It is such a marvel that Jesus was able to reveal to this respected, religious leader, Nicodemus, the sublime truths of the cross, God's love, and faith. Jesus spoke those never-to-be forgotten words: "That whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." John 3:15, 16. This is the most well recognized verse in the whole Bible. You see signs with "John 3:16" held up at mass sporting events. But Jesus gave this message to a one-on-one audience and that to a zealous religious advocate. Must not this be a message from Jesus' heart to my heart, to your individual heart. "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so!"

The "world" is me and it is you. We are "flesh," religious as we may be. The "world" is "flesh." Though we are in the church we remain "flesh." And all the sins that we see in the world are contained in our hearts potentially to flare forth if we are not born again today by the Spirit of God.

But God's love for the "world"—you and me, creates faith. He makes it possible for us to believe. Because He gives a measure of faith to every one, God believes that the world can be saved. If the world would not hinder His great love for it, it would be saved. There is no reason why it should not be saved, from His standpoint, other than the fact that it will not choose to be saved and prefers to remain in darkness rather than His creative light.

Again, Jesus revealed to Nicodemus some of the most profound truth, which to this day has not been grasped by the great systems of theology that Catholicism or Protestantism has produced. You see, Calvinism says that God's grace is irresistible to those whom He has



elected to save, therefore they are predestined for eternal life. Those elected for destruction are predetermined to go into perdition. Wesleyan Arminianism teaches that Jesus potentially died to save the whole human family and offers salvation to all, but only those who get it right by believing Jesus' offer will be saved. In other words, God condemns them before they believe in His Son, but when they believe in the offer of Christ they are no longer condemned.

But Jesus taught the fullest rays of sunshine truth to Nicodemus, profound truth, which we as Seventh-day Adventists must understand: "For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved." John 3:17. You see, most Christian preachers declare that God is sending the world to hell in a hand basket. He's going to fry them good and crisp.

To the contrary, Jesus' good news message is, "I am the Gospel. God sent me to be the Saviour of the world. I have saved the world. Therefore, the world is not condemned." Jesus' message is just the reverse of popular evangelicalism. It says the world is condemned and going to hell.

If that is the case, then that which is condemned should immediately be annihilated, so why isn't it? The reason is the Gospel does not condemn. It is just the opposite of popular preaching and notions based upon it.

Jesus developed this thought further: "He that believeth on Him is not condemned: but He that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." John 3:18. Jesus' Word to the world, to the sinner, is positive. God does not condemn because Jesus was condemned as representative sinner in our place. This gift of justification is given to each individual, for He tasted death for every man. Heb. 2:9. It is not just a corporate gift to the whole number, but it is an individual gift to every man, woman and child.

But if one exercises His God-given freedom of the right of refusal, then he rejects and despises the gift and so judges himself unworthy of forever-life with Christ, and brings the condemnation upon himself. Hence, condemnation is no arbitrary judgment on God's part. It is man's choice of destiny.

Jesus is the light of the world. He is the creative Word of God. "And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." John 3:19. The light given every man, if rejected and hindered, gives place

for the darkness to creep into the life with its ever-increasing shadows, thus producing evil deeds which are all that the fallen, sinful human heart can produce without Jesus, the light of the world.

When the United States dropped those awful atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which precipitated Japan's surrender by the emperor, some one quarter of a million innocent lives were incinerated. Everything within an eight-mile radius were annihilated.

One grandfather whose family was instantly killed survived. His granddaughter reflected, "My mother would often ask my grandfather why he had so many scars on his neck. He always told her that he had been bitten by a tiger, as if an animal, not a human, had done this to him. My grandfather does not like to talk about the atomic bombing.

"But I, for one, am eager to hear *more* about the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki because they kindle within me a fascinating conundrum. I think of my grandfather's first family, and of all their innocence, and I wonder why they were destined to die and yet I deserve to live. It isn't fair. I feel like a traitor to them for being American. And yet, I'm ashamed to say this, but I'm sort of glad that it happened. How could I not be? Had they not died, had my adopted country not dropped the atomic bomb on them, my mother would never have been born and neither would I. Is that very selfish of me? Am I somehow so deficient in human sympathy that I cannot fully condemn the United States for its horrible actions, simply because my own life sprang in a way from the nuclear incineration that cremated my grandfather's first family?"

Our first family deserved to be condemned and incinerated, but they were not for Jesus' pledged His life in our stead. He took our immolation on His cross. Now we live with Him as our flesh is crucified with Christ through the new birth imparted by the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. So it is no longer I who am living, but Christ lives in me, in you. Amen.