

## SM006 – A Visitor in the Dark

It was Passover in Israel – the greatest of all the festivals for the people of God for in this celebration was a reminder of the great acts of God that delivered His people from the bondage of the Egyptians. And in this celebration was something else – a hope and a promise for another deliverance when the Messiah would come.

Jesus had celebrated the Passover in Jerusalem since he was 12. That Passover has become famous for the things he said to the leaders of Israel even though a youth. This one would be eventful as well for the things he would say to one leader of Israel.

Jesus and his family and his disciples were preparing to journey to Jerusalem for the feast.

“You could do something great there, Jesus!” one of the disciples said.

“Didn’t you learn anything from the wedding?” Jesus asked. “When I did this miracle I did it in secret. I did it because of faith. I did it because I had compassion upon the family members who were about to lose their honor.”

“If I must exercise my power, I do it to touch the hearts of people as well as their bodies. I do it rescue them. And I can only do what my Father tells me to do.”

The disciples did not say anymore. They were still trying to grasp all that Jesus was. They were still trying to understand his power and his mission. Answers did not come easily. Their minds had been shaped by centuries of expectation that his people held – expectations about the Messiah, what he would be like and what he would do. There was so much to be done in the land, yet Jesus seemed to be taking his time. When he could declare openly for himself, he held back and preferred to work, at least for now, in the background.

The Passover festivities were glorious. It was the first time for Jesus to celebrate with his disciples. They kept looking to Jesus, wondering if he would do or say anything that might openly show he was the promised Messiah.

One day, during the week of celebration, the disciples noticed Jesus having a conversation with a familiar looking man. Yes, he was one of the household servants from the wedding and he had come to the feast. They drew near and listened.

“She is in so much pain, Master. On the way to Feast, she took a fall and she has not been able to walk. She has not been able to join in any of the celebrations, but I also fear that she is worsening. She is in the Court of the Women. She is faithful to our God. Even though she suffers, she still wants to be present for the celebrations, but at times she cries out in pain.

Jesus, I know what you did at the wedding. I know that you turned the water into wine. Could you come and do something for her?"

Jesus looked to his disciples, he looked at the crowd, most who had not heard and were busy with their celebration, but some had heard, including some of the religious leaders.

Jesus said, "I will come. Bring me to her," and Jesus walked with his disciples to the Court of the Women followed by the rulers of the people who were on the alert for any would-be prophets who might cause trouble during the Feast. Ever since John the prophet had been preaching in the wilderness, the rulers had been paying close attention to all the proceedings throughout the temple. It was one thing to have a prophet in the wilderness causing problems, but what if he or some other rabble rouser would bring a message of doom to the city. It would cause a riot. And so to be very careful, the Pharisees, who had heard that John was proclaiming that the Messiah was soon to be revealed, followed and they would be stunned by what they saw.

Jesus and his disciples walked into the Court of the Women. They found the servant's wife. They saw her disfigured leg and the crude crutch upon which she leaned, and then it happened. There was a word of command from Jesus, a gentle touch, then a gasp from the woman as if she felt a great surge of energy course through her body and she said, "I am well. He has done it. The one who turned water into wine has healed my leg. I can walk again." A crowd began to gather, and the woman pointed to Jesus and said, "He has done it. Jesus has healed me." Many voices in the crowd said, "Thanks be to God for his mercy," but soon others began bringing their sick to Jesus and Jesus, feeling compassion for them healed them all while the rulers looked on with astonishment.

The people began to say, "Has God sent a new prophet? Is he the Messiah? Jesus, we will follow you. Jesus, be our leader. Jesus we believe in you. We trust you. We will follow you."

But Jesus surprised them all. He lifted his hands to command silence and said, "You don't know what you are saying. You don't yet understand. There is much to say to you, but I cannot share it with you now. I know your hearts. You may say one thing, but your heart is not yet in the right place. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." And with that he turned and left the Temple.

The ancient records tell us that many believed when they saw the signs. But we are also told something else – Jesus didn't believe in them because He knew what was in their hearts.

Remember the story of Jesus' first encounter with Simon? When Jesus first saw him he changed his name to Peter, Rock, because He saw in him character that could be developed into rock-like character that would give strength to others.

Remember when Jesus first encountered Nathanael? “Here is a true Israelite! A man of integrity!” And Nathanael said, “How do you know me?” And Nathanael would find out that Jesus knew what was in the hearts of all people, including those with less than noble intentions. Such was the case with the people in Jerusalem. They saw Jesus do miracles and they said, “We believe! We believe!” But what did they believe? That Jesus was a miracle worker? That Jesus was a healer? And why did they believe? Was it only that they might see exciting things? Was it only that they might have their afflictions eased? Jesus was concerned for their afflictions and had compassion upon them, but their physical troubles were not their primary need.

And so we are told that Jesus did not entrust Himself to them. He heard their words of praise, but as He looked into their hearts, He did not see rock-like character as with Simon Peter nor did he find integrity as with Nathanael. And so Jesus left them and went his way, refusing to spend more time with these insincere believers, because he knew what was in their heart.

But one man followed. He was one of the rulers of the people. He was a teacher in Israel, some said, the teacher in Israel. His name was Nicodemus and he was intrigued by what this Jesus had said and done. He followed Jesus at a distance so as not to arouse suspicion. He saw the home where he was staying, marked it well, and returned to the Temple. But he knew what he had to do. He knew he had to speak to this man who had performed the miracles and who, at the same time, had refused the acclamations of the people. And he would do it soon. He would do it that night.

### **Interlude**

It was late evening. Some of the disciples had retired for the night. The others said, “Jesus, will you not take rest? Why are you staying up so late?”

“I am waiting,” he said. “Someone with a great burden and with many needs is coming.”

“How ... how do you know this?” And then, they heard the knock on the door. It was soft but purposeful and persistent. Who would be out this time of night? The disciples went to the door and opened it slowly. By his dress, they could see the stature and the dignity of the visitor in the dark. He was a Pharisee. Nicodemus had come.

The Pharisees were a strict sect of Jewish men who believed they had the correct interpretation of the laws of Moses. They relied not only on the words of Moses but on the traditions of the elders of Israel. They believed everyone should follow their vision of how the people of God should live and if everyone would follow their example, then the Messiah would come, so they thought. But not everyone followed the Pharisees, and even if they wanted, not everyone

could. Their applications of the Laws of Moses were so strict. The common people could not even begin to follow all that they said was necessary to obey God.

What did this man want with Jesus? Why was he coming in the dark?

“Jesus, there is a Pharisee standing at the door. He says he wants to talk with you.”

“Let him in.”

“But Lord, these are the ones who caused so many problems for John. They will cause problems for you. Are you sure we should let him in?”

“We welcome all who seek after God in truth. Let him in!”

Nicodemus entered, and he could feel the hot stares of the ones who had let him in. He ignored them. He had come to see Jesus and was grateful for an audience. What would Jesus say to him? Jesus had refused to play along with the insincere believers who had seen his miracles earlier in the day. What would Jesus see in him?

Nicodemus approached Jesus politely and said, “Thank you Teacher, for seeing me. I heard the things you said today in the Temple. I was impressed. I saw what you did in the Temple. I also saw that when some of the people began to say things about you being a prophet, or even more, you refused to acknowledge them and that impressed me as well. I am convinced that you have come from God ... as a ... teacher ... because no one can do these signs, these miracles that you do unless God is with him.”

Jesus looked intently at Nicodemus, a smile lifted the edge of his mouth, and he peered into his heart and discovered a man who was searching and who was hungry for all the truth. Here was a man Jesus could talk with. And just as Jesus had come right to the point with Simon Peter and Nathanael, he came right to the point with Nicodemus.

“Nicodemus, you say that I am a teacher. But truly, truly I say to you. Unless you are born again, you cannot see the kingdom of God for which you long.”

The answer puzzled Nicodemus. He believed that Jesus was from God – in some way. But this talk about being born again – what did it mean? Nicodemus longed for the coming of the kingdom of God but what did Jesus mean when he said unless one is born again one cannot see the kingdom of God?

Nicodemus said, “I do not understand. How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?”

And this answer revealed the problem in Nicodemus’ understanding. He did not know that Jesus was talking about a spiritual birth. He did not know that Jesus was talking about spiritual realities. Nicodemus and his Pharisee colleagues were so caught up in the interpretations of the laws of Moses, what people could and could not eat, what they could and could not do on the Sabbath, all physical things, and they had lost sight of the power of the Spirit of God.

Jesus pressed this point home: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”

Jesus went on – “That which is born of the flesh is flesh. That which is born of the Spirit of God is Spirit. When a man is born into the world he is born into a physical family and he has a physical body and lives in the physical world. But that isn’t enough to be in a relationship with God. It is not enough for people to wrangle over the laws of Moses over fleshly things. What a person needs is to be born of the Spirit. Then, he will see what the kingdom of God is really about and will be able to enter it.”

Jesus could see by the look on Nicodemus’ face that he wasn’t getting it. Jesus continued, “Nicodemus, don’t be amazed about this that I said you must be born again.” Jesus sought for an explanation that would help his new friend.

“Nicodemus, think of the wind. You can feel it but you can’t see it. You don’t know where it has come from and where it is going. It comes from one part of the world, passes our way and to another part of the world. We cannot see it. We cannot put our arms around it. We cannot control it the way you and your Pharisee friends try to control every movement of God and his people with their traditions. But you accept that the wind is real, that it exists. In the same way, what I have talked to you about, that a man must be born of the Spirit, is something a man cannot see or control or completely know but it is real and it exists.

Nicodemus frowned. He was trying to understand. He looked down, and then blurted out in confusion, “Jesus, how can these things be?”

“Are you the teacher in Israel,” Jesus said, “and you do not understand these things? Let me tell you why you do not understand. Nicodemus, you haven’t really believed.

The words struck Nicodemus like a thunderclap. Could it be that all these years he had lost sight of God in the laws of God? Could it be that he was so caught up in duties that he had lost a living faith in the living God?"

Jesus' words continued to pierce his heart. "Nicodemus, I have so many things to tell you. I have been talking about the work of the Spirit of God on the heart of a man as he lives in this world. But what if I start telling you about heavenly things I have seen? What if I start telling you things about what goes on in heaven that no one else knows because no one has been able to ascend into heaven? But I have come from heaven and I know all about heavenly things and earthly things including being born again.

"Nicodemus, remember our history! Remember what happened when Moses lifted up the serpent on the pole in the wilderness? The people were healed of their rebellion. It is not enough to know the laws of Moses and to make new rules and new traditions and try to bring in the kingdom of God by these traditions. The problem is much deeper than outward, fleshly observance. The problem is a deep, spiritual problem. The problem is sin.

"When our ancestors rebelled against God and God sent the snakes in the desert to bite them, God did not direct the people to obey the laws more at that time. They had poison in their bodies and no amount of keeping the laws of Moses would help them at that time. God told Moses to make a serpent out of bronze and to place it upon a pole. Moses lifted up the pole and when people looked upon the serpent on the pole they were healed by the miraculous hand of God from their snake bite.

"Nicodemus there is another snake bite and its poison has seeped deep into the bodies and the spirits of every human. It is the snake bite of sin and just as Moses lifted up the serpent on the pole to bring healing so I, the Son of Man, will be lifted up before all the people so that whoever looks to me and believes in me will have eternal life. It takes the work of the Spirit of God to bring this kind of healing to the hearts of people."

The conversation went on for some time. Nicodemus listening, asking questions. Jesus patiently answering and showing love for this man. And we do not know how it ended at that moment.

But the question I have now is, how does this conversation end for you? Have you been born again? Or, are you trying to please God by your religious efforts?

The apostle John was present that night and later he would write about it in his Gospel and this is how he summarized the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus.

<sup>16</sup> “For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him. <sup>18</sup> “There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God’s one and only Son. <sup>19</sup> And the judgment is based on this fact: God’s light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil. <sup>20</sup> All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants.”

There are five truths Nicodemus, the visitor in the dark, needed to know that night and that you need to know today.

1. God loves the world. Nicodemus and his Pharisee friends had missed the point. They were caught up in the details and were using those details of the Law to drive people away from God and to separate people from one another. They had missed what the laws were all about – the love of God for God so loved the world.
2. The greatest expression of the love of God is that He sent His only begotten Son into the world. God in heaven manifested Himself and this manifestation of God is the One we call the Son of God. God loved the world so much that at the right time He sent this expression of Himself, His very nature, His eternal, begotten Son, into the world and when He sent Him He did not send Him with more laws but He sent Him with love for sinful, confused people like Nicodemus and like us that we might be born again and come into a relationship with Him.
3. What God asks of us is faith. When we talk about believing in Jesus we are talking about understanding who Jesus really is. Do you believe he a miracle worker? That is not enough. Do you believe he a healer? That is not enough. Do you believe he is a teacher? That is not enough. You must believe that He is the manifestation of God in the world who has come to deliver us from sin. You must believe that the real issue is not the amount of commandments you keep or the number of good deeds you do but it is whether you have been born again because the primary problem of mankind is our sin from which we need to be healed. In order to heal us from our sin, Jesus would be lifted up on a cross so that all who would look to Him would find forgiveness and could have a new spiritual start and not perish from the snake bite of sin.

4. Fourth, we must realize that God sent Christ not to judge people to save them.

The Pharisees were so judgmental with their interpretations of the Laws of Moses but God wasn't this way. If he was, all would be lost for we all know we have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. What we need is a Savior who will deliver us from ourselves and from the darkness of the world and from our failures. But if we will not take this path and if we stubbornly hold onto our old ways and refuse the way of Jesus Christ then we are judged already – our eternal fate is sealed and we are doomed because we have not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God and what is His name? His name is Jesus.

5. And does this really happen with some people? Do some people really turn away from the light and the love of God? And the answer is a sad "yes".

"God's light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil."

I hope that is not a description of you – a person who loves the darkness rather than the light, a person who does not want to be exposed and yet who does not want to turn from the darkness of his deeds. But it need not be this way with you for our story concludes with these words:

"Those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants."

Are you one who seeks for truth? If you are then it shows that God is already at work in you and when you see the love of God in the person of Jesus Christ who came to show us all the truth, then you will come to Him, believe in His name and find eternal life. This was the message to the man who visited Jesus in the dark. His darkness was in his soul as well as in his surroundings. This is the story of the visitor in the dark.