

“Nic at Night”

John 3:1-21

Series: Face-to-Face with Jesus 2. The Doubtful Meet Jesus

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The Woodside Church

March 13, 2022

A pastor announced he is leaving next month to serve another church. That Sunday night, a church elder came over to his house all upset. “Pastor, your departure will devastate this church. After you’re gone everything will go downhill.” In a strange way, the pastor felt good about this but he needed to reassure his elder. “Oh Joe,” the pastor soothed, “Don’t worry, God will bring another pastor.” “I know that Pastor,” Joe replied, “but things are going to go downhill.” This boosted the pastor’s ego even more, but he replied, “Joe the church is not dependent on one person, not even the pastor. After all, how do you know it’s going to get worse after I leave?” Joe replied, “Because I’ve been here through five pastors and every one of them was worse than the one before!”

Joe came that night looking for a Messiah and, for a moment, the pastor had a Messiah complex. Nicodemus, one of the leading elders of Israel, came one night looking for a Messiah. And underneath all his questions was a single simple one: “Why?” It’s the one question we start asking as toddlers and never stop. There are enough mysteries in the universe to keep us asking “Why?” for all eternity. For example ...

- Why do you drive on a parkway and park on a driveway?
- We have beef, chicken and liver flavored cat food. Why isn't there mouse-flavored cat food?
- Why are there five syllables in the word monosyllabic?
- You tell a man there are 400 billion stars and he believes you, but tell him a bench has wet paint and he has to touch it? Why?¹

Why? Probably the most asked and least-answered question in the English language. And when you bring up the topic of “God” the “Why?” questions swarm like pollen starved bees. “Why did I get cancer, God?” “Lord, why did my spouse leave me?” “Why is there so much starvation in our world?” “Why did Covid take so many lives?” “Why is there a war in the Ukraine?” Why God? Why?

“Why?” often gives birth to doubt. And doubt comes in many shapes and sizes. There is the doubt ignited by a *crisis*. Paul Borden tells about a Christian man who was laid off six months before retirement. The company finagled it so he lost all his benefits. He prayed, “God, I want to be a good husband. I’m going to church. I’m spending my life serving you,” and six months before retirement, all my security is taken away. “God, that’s not fair! I don’t know if Christianity is worth it!”²

Doubt arises when belief, is challenged. A childhood, Sunday school faith disintegrates in the face of “modern science” or college classes. Doubt can turn the most

¹ John Stumbo, “God’s Sovereignty: The Ultimate Question.”

² Paul Borden, “Doubts in Belief,” *Preaching Today*

committed believer into an atheist. Bart Ehrman is one of the most popular scholars and authors on the New Testament. As a teenager he had a “born again” experience and went to a conservative school Moody Bible Institute. From there he went to Princeton Seminary as a Ph.D. student. He led one of the discussion groups I was in. But at Princeton he began to have what he calls a “deconversion.” He recalls,

First, I lost my fundamentalist faith because of my scholarship. So I shifted from being an evangelical Christian to a fairly mainline liberal Protestant Christian. When I was at Rutgers University, I taught a course on the problem of suffering. This made me think more deeply about my own understanding of why there’s suffering in the world. Finally because I became dissatisfied with all the conventional answers, I decided I couldn’t believe in a God who was in any way intervening in this world, given the state of things. So that’s why I ended up losing my faith.

Doubt also comes when we *drift* away from God. If you don’t feed your faith it starves from spiritual malnutrition. I have sadly watched brothers and sisters in Christ whom I love become preoccupied with their weekend vacation home, sports games, chores or jobs and just drift away. I hear many say they simply got out of the habit of going to church during Covid. The current of attractions and distractions can carry us farther and farther out to sea when we are not tied to the anchor of Jesus Christ.

And doubt can even be the result of *religion*. There are believers who claim it all depends on God, but act like it all depends on them. They know a lot about God but don’t really know God. Some even say to me, “If I get more information about the Bible or religion I’ll have a deeper relationship with God.” As I just mentioned Dr. Bart Erhman knows more about the Bible than I’ll ever know. He is Professor of New Testament, Chair of the Religious Studies Department at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and one of the most popular experts on the Bible and yet he doesn’t believe. You can know a lot about God, the Bible and religion, but still not know the Father, walk with the Son, and be filled with the Spirit.

Nicodemus is a highly religious man. He is a Pharisee – one of the most devout, obedient groups in Judaism. More than that, Nicodemus serves on the elite Sanhedrin – the highest court of the Jews. He should be immune to doubt. But then he meets Jesus – an uneducated popular rabbi from the far province of Galilee. This carpenter turned preacher performs wonders and teaches truths Nicodemus has never seen or heard before. Suddenly, the rules, the rituals, the religion he obeyed since childhood are shaken. He feels drawn to this new teaching. But his colleagues on the Sanhedrin must not know his doubt. So we get Nic at Night. Under the cover of darkness he approaches Jesus.

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. John 3:2

But before Nicodemus can investigate Jesus’ theology, the young Rabbi sends the old Pharisee’s head spinning

I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.
John 3:3

What? Entrance into heaven requires a second labor and delivery?

“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?” John 3:4

Jesus is not speaking of another trip to the maternity floor. This is not a physical but a spiritual birth. A birth that comes from above.

I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.
John 3:5-6

Nicodemus is clueless. “How can this be?” John 3:9

That’s where doubt leaves us. “How can this be?” “How did this happen?” “Why did this happen?” “Why?” Our search for logical solutions brings us only so far. Doubt is not dangerous. Doubt is not something to fear. Doubt is not the sign of weak faith. It is part of being human. Doubt is never destructive so long as we do not let it rule us or drive us to despair. In fact, doubt can shape, sharpen and strengthen your faith if you are willing to place it in God’s hands. Doubt needs more than rational explanations. “Give me an answer, then I will believe.”

On April 8, 1966 – Good Friday – the cover of Time magazine was draped in black. It bore one single question, “Is God Dead?” The article claims science is responsible for the death of God. Science is so successful “what cannot be known by scientific methods seems uninteresting, unreal.” Churches will soon fade away. Nearly forty years later, Newsweek magazine responded to Time with a cover story entitled “Spirituality in America.” What it found is “Americans are looking for personal ecstatic experiences of God. Everywhere we looked there was a flowering spirituality.”³ After surveying the spiritual pathways of Catholics, Pentecostals, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews and Wiccans, Newsweek found they don’t seek rational answers to dispel their doubts. They hunger for an encounter with the living God. We yearn to know God. Even my teacher Bart Erhman says, “I would actually like to be a believer.”⁴

Jesus is the key to our doubts. He offers something entirely different than the religions and philosophies of the world. Moses brought down the Torah. Muhammad wrote down the Koran. The Buddha taught the eight-fold path. But Jesus gives us Himself: not a book, a philosophy or a path but a Person. As Nicodemus endures that dark night of the soul, Jesus says,

³ Jerry Adler, “In Search of Spirituality,” *Newsweek*, September 5, 2005, p. 47, 49.

⁴Herschel Shanks, “Losing Faith: 2 Who Did and 2 Who Didn’t” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, March/April, 2007, p. 50-57.

No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came down from heaven – the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. John 3:13-14

Jesus is God in the flesh. He is the personal experience of God Newsweek says everyone seeks. What's more, He is the kind of God who is willing to enter our personal hell – our sin, our pain, our doubts and our devastation – and lay down His life for us. That's the God we are looking for.

David Mains, director of Chapel Ministries, was sitting in a dentist chair when his orthodontist asked David if he would go with him to see a movie. "I've seen this film five times already," said the orthodontist, "and each time I break down and weep at the same part of the story. I'm hoping you can help me understand why that scene in the movie makes me cry." "Sure," David said. "What movie is it?" His orthodontist replied, "*Terminator 2*, with Arnold Schwarzenegger!" When David sat with his friend through the movie, the orthodontist broke down as before. It happened in the scene where the Terminator gave his life to save the life of a child. Over coffee after the film, the two men talked. The orthodontist hinted at an inner longing for a father's love. David identified the symbol of sacrificial love, so poignantly displayed in the movie, as a picture of God's love. "I believe that's what you are looking for," David said. "Your tears are proof of that." The orthodontist agreed. Together they bowed in prayer and a middle-aged orthodontist received the forgiveness and love of his Heavenly Father.⁵

God did not send us a rational explanation. He did not send us a rule book. He did not send us more rituals. He could have. But He knows our real need. He came Himself.

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. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. John 3:16-17

Believing in Jesus will not dispel all doubt. Trusting in Jesus means you have someone who will guide you to the other side of doubt.

I have a friend named Jim who was stricken with doubt. Jim gave me permission to tell how he found and lost his faith in God. During World War II, Jim served as a Marine. While stationed in China, a doctor shared the Gospel with him and Jim welcomed Christ into his life. He took up electrical engineering after the war. Yet Jim's faith was so strong he went to seminary. "I was a firebrand in those days," he recalls. "I had all the answers, I'd quote Bible verses and criticize anyone who doubted." But then Jim started to have his own doubts. The black and white answers of his fundamentalist church did not quiet his own questions. And the hypocritical lifestyle of the church leaders caused him to turn away.

⁵ Contributed by Greg Asimakoupoulos.

In the 60's, Jim swung from one extreme to the other. Though he earned a Ph.D. in Biblical studies, he began to doubt the existence of God. "I argued that the church was irrelevant. I beat down the faith of people I'd meet. I even talked people out of going into the ministry." By the late 60's Jim gave up on the church and God altogether. Like Bart Erhman, he could see plenty of pain in the world. He couldn't see God.

Even though Jim left God, there was no peace in his heart ... only a void. To fill it, Jim began to drink. For over a decade, he had feverish bouts of drunkenness followed by hangovers. It became so bad one day he drove his car up on his lawn and fell out the door with his feet tangled in the steering wheel. Sobbing, his wife asked, "Why are you doing this to us?" All Jim could say was, "Get Aaron." Aaron was a former student of Jim's who became an Episcopal priest filled with the Spirit. When he came, he did not scold or judge Jim. He simply touched him, laid his hands on Jim and prayed.

Jim's recovery and return to God were slow and painful. He was starting over in the faith, like a new born babe. No simple answers. No harsh judgment. He is deeply moved by the unconditional love of his Heavenly Father who forgave him and gave him a fresh start. "I am constantly overwhelmed to tears," Jim told me, "when I meditate on the crucifixion of my Lord and know that by his wounds I am healed."

Are you filled with doubt? I offer you no proof, verse or creed. All I can do is introduce you to the Risen Jesus. He moved the stone. Let Him move your heart.