**CLOSE ENCOUNTERS (#2)**

***Nicodemus (John 3)***

This week I am focusing our attention on individuals who had one-on-one encounters with Jesus. Yes, the Lord loved the multitudes and had compassion on them as a shepherd who sees a scattered flock in danger (Matt. 9:36). But what intrigues me so much is Christ’s dozens of personal connections to hurting or seeking people who wanted a face-to-face meeting with Him. No matter how busy He was Christ always seemed to have time for a man or woman who begged for His attention. I love that. It makes me feel that He would even stop to talk to me too. Makes me want to sing, “Oh how I love Jesus, Oh how I love Jesus, Oh how I love Jesus, because He first loved me.”

Have you ever read the famous poem by William Ernest Henley called *Invictus*?

Out of the night that covers me, Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be, For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance, I have not winced nor cried aloud,
Under the bludgeoning’s of chance, My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears, Looms but the horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years, Finds – and shall find me – unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate, How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.

At first reading it sounds so powerful and inspirational. Makes you feel you can lift yourself up by your own bootstraps and do anything you set your mind to do. But upon reflection, and upon reading the Bible, I realize that this rugged self-made man is but a fool. It is an echo of the *Humanist Manifesto* *2* written in 1973 by a group of atheists who proclaimed, “No deity will save us, we must save ourselves.” To become “*the master of your fate, the captain of your soul*,” is to denounce Christ as “*the Captain of their salvation*” (Heb. 2:10). Nicodemus had to learn that lesson too.

Nicodemus is the famous “*Ruler of the Jews*” who came to Jesus at night (Jn. 3:1-2). We know he must have been a wealthy man to be able to afford very expensive ointment to bury Jesus (Jn. 19:38-39). We also know he was a Pharisee (Jn. 7:47-50). This means he had joined the group called *Chaburah* (“the brotherhood”), an elite religious fraternity known as “the separated ones” who memorized the Torah (all 613 laws of Moses) and studied the *Mishna* (oral laws written into codes), the *Talmud* (commentaries written by Rabbis), and the *Gemara* (discussions by Rabbis on the meaning of the laws).

The Pharisees, like Nicodemus, were nitpickers concerning keeping the Law. They demanded perfection from themselves. They felt superior to the lower rank-and-file commoners. It must have been a daily grudge match to meticulously analyze every moment of every day to make sure you were living the Law to perfection in order to be saved. As the apostles later put it, they “*put a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear” (Ac 15:10).*

It is little wonder that when Nicodemus heard Jesus repeatedly say things like, “*I have come to give you life, and to give it to you abundantly*” (Jn. 10:10), and words like “*Come unto Me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest*” (Matt. 11:28), it must have sounded so refreshing. He just had to meet this Man and learn more. So this prestigious upper-class ruler who sat on the highest court in Judaism comes to have a night-time rendezvous with this youthful 30 year old carpenter’s son from the hillbilly backwater town of Nazareth (“*can any good thing come out of Nazareth*?” – Jn. 1:46). Just imagine that awkward encounter under the moon and stars. It makes me smile just thinking about it.

I would have loved to be a fly on the wall and seen and heard this man-to-man dialogue. Actually, we do have twenty-one verses of this meeting, far more than most other encounters with Christ. We also have some follow-up information that reveals that Nicodemus grew to know and love Jesus, becoming a staunch defender of His ministry.

Do yourself a favor and read John 7:25-51 to see how this Sanhedrin Court, made up of 70 members, found Nicodemus standing up against the majority of his peers to defend Christ against vicious attacks. It is one of the most riveting sections in all the gospels, for you can feel the incredible cut-it-with-a-knife tension in the air. The crowds were swelling to Jesus and the envious Jewish leaders were coming unhinged. They were mad with rage to kill Christ. In that blood-thirsty setting Nicodemus steps up to address them in defense of Jesus. When the Court asks, “*Have any of the rulers or Pharisees believed in Him*?” Nicodemus raises his hand and says, “*Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing*?” As Teddy Roosevelt might say, “Bully for you!” That showed tremendous courage.

We all feel sure we know what Nicodemus did when his fellow Sanhedrin members voted to bring Jesus to trial and condemn Him. The vote was not unanimous. If Joseph of Arimathea was on that court too we know there would at least have been two “Nay” votes. After the dastardly deed was done and Jesus hung limp on that old rugged cross, these two brave men requested from Pilate the bloody body to bury Jesus. Don’t think for a second this wasn’t an act of incredible courage! For a Jew, especially a “*ruler* *of the Jews*,” to request a decent burial for the most hated enemy of the Sanhedrin, is amazing. Also, this act of touching a dead body labeled him “unclean,” thus disqualifying him from participation in the sacred Passover festivities.

Nicodemus. What a man! His nighttime encounter with Christ forever changed his life, and we hope his eternity.

It is my hope and prayer that each of us have had a personal close encounter with Jesus. While we are not able to personally see, touch, hear and speak with Jesus in the flesh, we can all come to the same life-changing decision that Nicodemus made. When Jesus desperately needed an ally He found out who His true friends were. He still can.

“Stand up, stand up for Jesus, the trumpet call obey.
Forth to the mighty conflict in this His glorious day.
Ye that are men now serve Him, against unnumbered foes,
Let courage rise with danger, and strength to strength oppose.”

I am *not* the master of my fate. I am *not* the captain of my soul. Jesus is!

I love you. - Rick