

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Nicodemus: Back into Who Knows What”

Dr. Jay Howell

John 3:18-21

September 15, 2024

This man Nicodemus has been our lens onto questions of faith, questions of doubt, and the declaration of the good news in Christ Jesus and the love of God. If you’ve been with us as we’ve gone bit by bit through this single chapter in John’s Gospel, you’ve heard Nicodemus’ questions, Christ’s puzzling responses, and a powerful proclamation of God’s love for the world unto salvation and life. And as we come to the end of this particular exchange, one wonders, just how is Nicodemus taking all this in? Let’s go to God’s Word together, John 3:18-21.

Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Will you pray with me? Holy, Gracious God, your Word is a light, illuminating and revealing, and at times what it reveals is precisely what we would prefer to stay hidden. Be with us this day, and by your Word open our hearts to hear you anew, and to step into the light of your love. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

My mother took me to the airport knowing it would be the last time she would see me for a while. This was years ago. Just a little bit removed from college, I had worked and saved up for a one-way ticket to Buenos Aires, Argentina, with the intention to find a job teaching English as a foreign language and otherwise scratch out a livelihood. Didn’t have anything lined up, mind you. Didn’t have a job. Didn’t have a place to stay. Didn’t have any contacts in the city. So, the plan was to figure it out once I got there. The longer plan, such as it was, was indeed to make my way back home after some time away. But when I put it that way, yeah I admit it might sound kind of daunting—it really wasn’t, it was a well-worn trail for younger expats to follow—but I found it exhilarating. Call it wanderlust; call it youthful exploration; whatever. And for any of you who may or may not hold similar notions, of travel, of exploration, I get it. I’ve been there. It can be fun; it can be exhilarating, it can be fascinating. It can also be very lonely, but that’s another set of stories.

But I can only imagine what it must have looked like from my mother's perspective, seeing her baby boy walk into the Nashville airport, knowing she wouldn't be seeing me again for a while. It's that perspective that has come into a bit more focus for yours truly in recent years, trying to imagine the worry, the uncertainty of one day watching one or all of our kids venture out into the unknown. Doesn't have to be some global traipse like I did. Just into adulthood. Such is the nature of things. It happens.

But in this particular instance, I relate more and more with the torment I must have put my parents through, not knowing where I would go, who I would meet, or what would happen along the way. What did come into focus only later was that for all the exploration, all the romantic notions of seeing the world, all the chasing after horizons, there was a good bit of running away that I was doing too. There's a good bit of uncertainty clouding the end of this exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus.

We heard last week Christ's words, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." This is a message of hope, of salvation, of the love of God.

But then, Jesus turns to what might be considered a bit of a harsher tone. Right after that in v. 18: "Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God." A bit binary there, isn't it? Either this or that. Black and white. Light and dark. Those who believe are not condemned, but those who don't believe are already condemned. And we might be thinking, well hold on. Where's the love, man? How can you claim that a loving God graciously sends and gives his Son in order to save the world, and then in the same breath say that any who don't believe in that Son are condemned already?

It's like inviting someone into this life of faith in the Lord who loves, the Lord who gives, but then adding in, "Oh and by the way, if you don't, well, do you like hot yoga? It'll be something like that." Have you ever heard a message like that? To the effect of, "Believe in Jesus who loves you, but if you don't, you're going to hell." Now there's a lot we can say about judgment and justice and the holiness and righteousness of God. A lot we could say about the notion of perdition, of hell too for that matter. It isn't for no reason that rhetoric like that has been guided by Scripture. It isn't for no reason that it hasn't been abused too. If it's something that makes you say, "Hey, I have more questions," let's talk some more.

But just in that very premise of "You better believe, or else you'll be condemned," doesn't sound very loving, does it? Sounds downright coercive. But notice how Jesus puts it after that. In v. 19, "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come into the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed." The judgment, it says, isn't some fiery torture chamber as punishment. It's people loving darkness rather than light, and much preferring

to stay there. The judgment is being left to precisely what, if left to our own devices, what we would want.

Many of you may have heard of the Christian writer C. S. Lewis. Best known for *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and the Narnia series. One of his other books, though, is called *The Great Divorce*, which is one writer's imagining of a journey through heaven and hell. And there's something compelling about it. In this imagining, hell isn't full of demons and pitchforks. Instead, it's quite gray. And the punishment is that all of these wayward souls are condemned (or allowed, depending on how you look at it) to indulge their desires to do whatever they want. And in doing so, it makes them more and more alone and less and less alive. Dead, gray, and isolated. That's their judgment. That's their condemnation.

Again, the way Scripture talks about hell is a longer topic than we have time for today, but I wonder if that's a part of what Jesus is telling Nicodemus, of this judgment being for those with an invitation to come into the light but preferring to remain in darkness, to their own detriment and peril, a prison of their own making. The picture that comes into focus, then, isn't some coercive call "Believe, or else," but instead something like being imprisoned, and then someone opens the door to the cell and says, "Come with me," but instead of rushing into the light of freedom, some prefer to stay in chains.

That part feels pretty clear. What Jesus is saying feels pretty clear. That's not what's uncertain about this. What's uncertain is just what happens after the conversation is over. That is to say, we have no idea. It just ends. If you peaked ahead to the very next verse after the passage we read, looking at v. 22, it just says, "After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside." Notice what it doesn't say. It doesn't say something like, "Nicodemus looked stunned and a little confused," or "Nicodemus thanked Jesus and then quietly went back home." The conversation just ends, and then the story moves on.

It's even unclear just where Jesus stops talking. If you look closely in your Bibles, some will have a footnote after v. 15 and again after v. 22, adding that some scholars think that Jesus' words end after v. 15, and that it's just John, the Gospel writer, adding in some commentary. Little bit of Bible trivia, but any and all punctuation that you see in a Bible translation is an editorial decision made later. So it's entirely possible that vv. 16-22, including that famous John 3:16, isn't even Jesus talking. I think it's Jesus still talking, myself, but the point is, the conversation just stops, and we don't know what happens afterward—or at least we don't know what happens to Nicodemus. The most we can accurately say is that he left. He went back into the night, back into who knows what. And who knows what he was thinking? Who knows what wheels were turning? Maybe the biggest commentary and irony is that just as it's talking about not coming into the light and staying in the darkness, we have someone, this Nicodemus, who is himself by implication going back into the darkness. And isn't that the way it goes sometimes? Sometimes, and that may include today, we might be Nicodemus. Sometimes we're the ones going back into the shadows, back where it's comfortable, back where we know it'll be worse for us but at least it's familiar. We

don't want to step out, out into being known, out into the light, because we think that's where judgment happens. What we don't realize is that the real judgment, the real condemnation is our going back into a prison of our own making. Sometimes we're Nicodemus.

And then sometimes we're the ones watching Nicodemus leave. And not just leave, mind you, I mean at some point he was going to go back home, but depart from the direct influence and exchange with Jesus. We'll find out next week what happens next with Nicodemus as he reenters the narrative later on, but from that perspective it can feel just as uncertain, even frightening, because we can think, "Well what's going to happen with him? What steps will he take on his own? What decisions, good or bad, will he make? Will he stay in the shadows? Or will he come back?" Sometimes we're the ones watching Nicodemus leave.

It can be torturous, either way. To stay in the shadows, on one hand, is not an enjoyable thing. It's judgment, it's condemnation, it's a prison we put ourselves in. And then on the other, it can be downright agonizing watching someone you care about do that to themselves, not knowing if they'll come back. Could be saying goodbye to a friend, could be watching a loved one's ongoing struggle with addiction, could be dropping your kid off at school or college. Could be as broad as good general life decisions or as specific as their own walk of faith, and what happens to them next is outside your control and even your awareness; it's uncertain, and it's agonizing.

Kind of like a mother dropping her son off at the airport for a one-way flight to Argentina. Mom didn't take that lying down though. See after I had left, after I had gotten on the plane and was otherwise out of communication, she got on the horn. She connected with some friends of hers through a world missions network, who knew someone in Buenos Aires. So after I had been on a series of flights, again, without any communication, I get off the plane in Argentina, go through customs, and then walk out expecting to get a taxi to some hostel for the night. But instead, as I came out the door into the airport lobby, I see man standing on the other side of a plexiglass wall with my name written on a piece of paper. And I thought, "That's strange. I don't know anyone in this city." So I obviously followed him blindly into the dark parking lot. Nah, he told me who he was and why he was there. What emerged was a beautiful friendship with him and his family, tethering me to a place of love and of faith while I was a bit out in the wilderness, out in the shadows. That's a whole other set of stories.

That's not to say parents should hover over their children's lives, not letting them make their own decisions. That's not the point. The point is, even when we watch someone we love step out into the shadows, past beyond where we can see them, even when we might take those steps ourselves, into a prison of our own making, we can simply never know all the many, beautiful ways God might invite us into the light.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.