

John 3

Encountering Jesus, Part 1

One can barely say, “John chapter 3” without adding “verse 16.” Yet like every verse in the Bible, John 3:16 fits within a narrative context of the Gospel of John. In this case, it is the climax of a fascinating encounter between Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus. This encounter is the first of two major encounters in the opening chapters of John. The first is with a Jewish religious leader while the second is with a morally questionable Samaritan woman (John 4:1ff). But first, let us explore Jesus’s encounter with the Pharisee.

The Encounter

Remember the four “L’s” of John – Logos, Life, Light, and Lamb. These themes, as we have seen already, recur throughout the narrative. The encounter with Nicodemus is no different. John begins by directing us to the time of the encounter: nighttime (vs. 2). Right away, John prepares us to see that this religious leader is in the dark both literally and spiritually. The good news is that he has come to the light (see vs. 19-21).

Nicodemus knows there is something different about Jesus. He calls him “Rabbi” (or “Teacher”) and knows that no ordinary person “can do these signs that you do unless God is with him” (vs. 2). The answer Jesus gives him is direct and convicting. One cannot see (more Light language) unless he is born again.

To be “born again,” is common evangelical lingo introduced by Jesus here. Nicodemus was confused. No one can physically be born again. But that is the point. Redemption is not a matter of the will, but of the Creator. He must save. He must transform. He must redeem. He must recreate.

To make his point clear, Jesus directs Nicodemus to the cross by first looking back at the story of Moses lifting the bronze serpent (Numbers 21). Just as it was lifted to save the dying Israelites, so God will lift the Son of God to save sinners. And whoever believes this “may have eternal life.”

Then comes the climax, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

So again, we see the combined work of the Logos (vs. 3,5, 8), Light (vs. 2, 3, 19-21), Life (vs. 3, 5-6, 15-16), and Lamb (vs. 14-15, 16).