Seven People. One Saviour – Week 1

A RELIGIOUS MAN WITH MUCH TO LEARN
(John 3 --> John 7:42-52 --> John 19:38-42)

MY HONOR, LET’S TRUST
I consider it an honor being with you these 7 weeks, and especially here at my Alma Mater. Students are often among the most zealous and committed believers once God has drawn to Christ. And so it is a privilege and a pleasure to be amongst you guys today, thank you, and let’s trust the Lord to do something great amongst us during our time together. Over the next seven weeks we will be looking into the Bible to learn from the stories of 7 very different people who all met Jesus Christ and whose lives were forever changed through that meeting. Perhaps we could describe these 7 people this way: these were people who each had a dramatic encounter with Jesus Christ.

VISITORS, WHY THIS THEME, FEEL COMFORTABLE
If you are a visitor here today I want to extend a special welcome to you, and perhaps I should make one clarifying statement as to why we are giving these next 7 weeks to this theme of Jesus encountering people. As a church we believe that Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, after He was crucified for our sins, rose from the dead, He ascended into the heavens where He sits at the right hand of God the Father. So we believe that Jesus is alive today – he rose from the dead after they killed Him. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him, and so we believe that it is still possible today for sinners like us to have a dramatic encounter with Him. And so if you are a visitor here, I want to encourage you that although it does sometimes feel a little awkward being in a church where people raise their hands in worship, and the preacher preaches like he actually believes what he’s saying, I hope that you will still feel comfortable enough amongst us to relax and listen patiently and be impacted by the words of the Bible about this man Jesus Christ. And it is our deepest prayer that through these true stories of the life and words of Jesus over these next 7 weeks that you too will have a dramatic encounter with Jesus through the living words of the Bible.

WHY IN CHURCH?
People find themselves in church for strange reasons. My own testimony of what brought us to church the night. Something happened to me that night, something which is explained in the life of Nicodemus whose story we will learn together tonight. So people find themselves in church for different reasons. In 1850 in England, in the month of January (which is mid-winter) a 16 year old young man was on his way to an appointment, when a fierce snow-storm descended upon him as he walked. He turned off the road to seek shelter and found himself in a small Methodist chapel. Noticing others in the room he realized that a church service was about to commence and so unable to leave he took a seat. And as the simple country preacher began to speak the words of the Gospel he reached a part of his sermon in which he quoted a portion of Scripture from the prophet Isaiah 45:22 where God says, “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.” This young man was deeply struck by these words as God opened his heart. He had a dramatic encounter with Jesus Christ that day through the words of the Bible and through the preaching of the gospel, and that young man went on to become possibly the greatest Christian preacher of the 19th Century. His name was Charles Spurgeon, “The Prince of Preachers”.

ASSUME A DESIRE FOR HEAVEN
So I don’t know why you’re here today but I am going to assume that every person in this room has a desire to go to heaven after they die – that when your time comes, and it
will, and you close your eyes on this life, that you will open your eyes and be in that better place.

NICODEMUS, DRAWN?, STILL TODAY
This morning we are going to look at the story of a man named Nicodemus, and it may be that like Nicodemus, you are here because you know that there is something different about Jesus Christ, and although you may never have had an encounter with Him, still you have a sense that you cannot shake that Jesus does have an answer to your deepest questions about life, and that maybe it is, as Christians believe, that this Jesus also holds keys of heaven and eternity. And my friend, as one who has had an encounter with Jesus through the truth of the Gospel, I can testify to you that He does indeed have the answers to our deepest questions, he is a wonderful master to serve, and still today He calls sinners to turn to Him and be saved.

JOHN 3:1-21

VERSE 1: FIRST ENCOUNTER, PHARISEE+, THAT'S WHY THE BIBLE SAYS...
These verses that I've just read record Nicodemus's first encounter with Jesus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a senior member of the ruling party of the Jewish nation. As such he was a man of power and of prestige and of education. All three of these qualities (power, prestige and education), often prevent people from having an encounter with Jesus Christ through the Bible. Now why is that? While I am not opposed to people holding positions of power, in which they are esteemed by others, and while I am certainly not opposed to getting a good education, is it not true that power, prestige (popularity) and education can lead to pride and to trusting in ourselves rather than in God? That's why the Bible says that God has chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith, and it's why Jesus said in Luke 18:24-25, "How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."

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VERSE 2: GRACE, RICH YET BANKRUPT, CAME BY NIGHT, LIKE US, AND YOU!
And yet, having said that, here we see in the life of Nicodemus the unconquerable, irresistible power of the grace of God to bring those whom He is setting His hand upon to Himself.

Nicodemus had all that this life could offer and yet when he heard the things that Jesus was teaching and saw the things that Jesus was doing he felt entirely bankrupt. He knew something of God was happening here with this man Jesus! And so he came to Jesus. But he came by night. He came under the cover of darkness so that no one would see him.

There is often in our early steps towards Christ a shame that we feel. We don't want to be seen by our friends and colleagues coming to Jesus, coming to church. We come shyly and cautiously, under the cover of night, as it were, and yet if God is drawing us we come, we still come, because, like Nicodemus, somehow we know that this Jesus is no ordinary man, and He has the words of life. Jesus said, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him, and I will raise Him up on the last day." I believe that God is drawing people here today to Jesus, just as He was drawing Nicodemus those many years ago.

RABBI
Nicodemus came by night and he said, “Rabbi,” which is a term of great respect in Israel. Nicodemus didn’t waltz up to Jesus with an attitude. He didn’t come as a man of power and prestige and education. He came as a humble man and came to the Savior of men seeking his own salvation. Please check your heart, my fellow sinner. Do you come to Jesus humbly this morning? We live in a day and time in which men like Richard Dawkins would win you to believe that everything you see in this grand universe simply appeared out of nothing, and they would have you scorn the very idea of believing in God, let alone seeking an encounter with Jesus Christ. Do you come humbly this morning, my friend? Do you come with respect?

“Rabbi,” said Nicodemus, “we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”

THE MIRACLES (WITHERED, DEMONS, IF YOU’re WILLING), WE KNOW.
Nicodemus had eyes. He had seen the miracles. Maybe he had seen Jesus tell the man with a withered hand, “Stretch out your hand,” and the man had stretch it out and it became as whole as the other. Perhaps he had seen Jesus cast demons out of blind or deaf people and the demons had come out at His command and the blind would see and the deaf would hear. Nicodemus perhaps had seen the man with leprosy come to Jesus and say, “Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean,” and then heard Jesus graciously respond, “I am willing. Be cleansed” and immediately his leprosy was healed. But whatever Nicodemus had been witness to, we know he had seen Jesus perform miracles and so he says to Jesus, “we know that you are from God.” Notice that he doesn’t say, “I know that you are from God,” he says, “we know”. “We, the Pharisees, know that you are from God.” And yet although the Pharisees knew that Jesus was from God it was the Pharisees that killed him. Listen to me, my fellow sinner, this is the sinful heart of every man and woman. We are so sinful that without the grace of an all-powerful and all-merciful God we rebel against the light that we have. You know that this is true of you...... As I know it is true of me...... We rebel against the knowledge of the truth that God gives every person coming into the world.

DAWKINS, DISPLAYED, CONQUERING GRACE, NICODEMUS’S CONSCIENCE
Richard Dawkins knows there is a God, the things that have been made declare God’s being, the creation declares His divine nature and eternal power, and so on that final Day Dawkins and all so-called atheists will be without excuse. And yet in God’s grace He draws his elect sinners irresistibly to Christ and overpowers our stubborn, rebellious hearts so that we will come. This is what was happening here to Nicodemus: God was drawing him; his conscience would no longer allow him to do what the other Pharisees continued to do: to reject Jesus despite the fact that they knew he was from God.

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VERSE 3: NOT ENOUGH, JESUS’ POINT, MEANING?
You see it’s not enough to know that Jesus was good, and kind and powerful. It’s not even enough to know, as the Pharisees did, that He is from God. And this is the very point that Jesus now makes to Nicodemus, and I say the same to you today:

Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” “It’s not enough to know about Me, Nicodemus. You must be born again.”

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You may wonder what this strange phrase means: to be “born again”. Well so did Nicodemus!

**VERSES 4-5: TRUTH, WATER AND THE SPIRIT, EZEKIEL 36**

Jesus says, "Truly, truly, Nicodemus." There is truth in this world. Everything is not relative. This “postmodern” world tells us not to hold convictions, at least not about the really important things in life. We are told that any exclusive claims of truth are offensive and arrogant. We are encouraged not to say that one religion is true and others are false. We are not supposed to tell people that they are under the wrath of God because of their sin, and that faith in Jesus is the only way to be saved. But Jesus doesn’t pander to our postmodern, irrational disdain of spiritual truth. He says, “TRULY I say to you, you will not see heaven unless you are born again.” According to Jesus, as offensive as it is to modern man, it is the truth! “You must be born of water and the Spirit.” What does that mean?

Jesus is referring to the words of one of the Jewish prophets from the old testament. 600 years before Jesus was born Ezekiel was foretelling what the Messiah would do. Remember now, Nicodemus is a Jewish Pharisee and he would have been quite familiar with the prophecy of Ezekiel of the coming Messiah. In Ezekiel 36 the prophet had predicted that:

1. Firstly, God would one day sprinkle clean water on His people, cleansing them from their sin (that explains the first reference – to be born of water is to be cleansed of sin, to be forgiven. So Jesus when Jesus says to Nicodemus “you must be born of water” He is saying, “If you want to go to heaven, you first need to be forgiven of your sin”). My friend, are you aware this morning that you need forgiveness?
2. Secondly, Ezekiel had said that God would give His people a new heart and put a new spirit within them, He would take out their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh and He would put His Spirit within them and cause them to obey Him (that explains Jesus’ second reference – when Jesus says to Nicodemus "you must be born of the Spirit” He is saying, "If you want to go to heaven, the Spirit of God – the Holy Spirit – has to come into you and changing your heart from a heart of rebellion to a heart that is tender to God").

So when Jesus says, "you must be born again", He means those two things: to be (1) forgiven of your sin and (2) to receive a new heart through the infilling of the Holy Spirit, and "unless that happens to you, you will not enter God’s Kingdom".

**You must be born again.**

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Jesus then continued to simplify the matter for us. He says to Nicodemus:

**VERSES 6-8: BORN CORRUPT AND SPIRITUALLY DEAD**

It’s actually quite a simple thing, said Jesus. The first time you’re born, you are born in the flesh, entirely corrupted by sin and therefore you cannot enter God’s Heavenly Kingdom. Our first birth is a birth “of the flesh”. We are born corrupt, entirely so, in body and soul, and we are born with a dead spirit – alive in the flesh, but dead in the spirit. This is why the Bible says that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” because “corruption cannot inherit incorruption”.

**OUR SINFULNESS, DEAD SPIRITS, FREEDOM IN CHRIST NOT RELIGION (NIC)**
If we're humble enough, we don't have to look very far within ourselves to know that we are sinners. God gave you a conscience, as He gave me, and you know as well as I do that we have all ignored that conscience a multitude of times. The spirit in every person born into this world is dead because of sin. We are slaves of sin, but Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, to set us free from sin. No amount of religious or 'spiritual' activity is ever going to change that. Believe me, my friend, no matter how good a person or how spiritual a person you think you are, you don’t have a patch on Nicodemus. He was a Jew, Jesus said "salvation is of the Jews", Nicodemus knew the true God. He was a Pharisee, of the strictest religious sect within the Jewish nation. He lived a perfect spotless life according to the Jewish laws, he read spiritual books more that you ever have or ever will, he prayed more than you ever have or ever will. He was a 'spiritual man' by anyone’s standards, and yet Jesus plainly tells him, "Nicodemus, you are dead in your sins, you are "of the flesh" and you cannot see or enter the kingdom of God." And if that is true of Nicodemus, my fellow sinner, and if you’ve got an honest bone in your body, you’ll admit that that is true of you.

MY KNYSNA EXPERIENCE

HOW THEN?
So we ask the question again, how is it then that we can become truly spiritual, so that we can enter the kingdom of heaven? How is it that we can be born again? Now listen to the words of Jesus: (v6) “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

You must be born of the Spirit.

There must be a profound regeneration, a recreation of your very being whereby your dead spirit is made alive, and a pure and upright nature is created within you. And this is something that only the Spirit of God Himself can do. It is not something you can control or do for yourself, any more than you could control your first birth. This second birth of the Spirit is like the wind. It is entirely in God’s control. He does it to whom He wants to when He wants to.

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VERSE 9: THEN HOW?
And so then Nicodemus quite rightly wanted and needed to know, “How can that happen to me, if it is so miraculous and so outside of our control?” “How can these things be?” he asks Jesus.

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VERSES 10-15: STRANGELY (3:16), GOD LOVES (VV), REPENT & BELIEVE ➔ FORGIVEN FOR CHRIST’S SAKE
And Jesus tells him, "It happens in a strange way, Nicodemus, it’s not what you think. It happens just like when the children of Israel were in the wilderness and they were being bitten by deadly serpents because of their sinfulness and Moses made a bronze serpent and put it on a pole and he lifted it up and anyone who simply LOOKED upon the bronze serpent on the pole was miraculously and immediately healed. In the same way, Nicodemus, I will be lifted up (on the cross) and whoever looks to Me, believes in Me, will have eternal life.

VERSES 16-17: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into
the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

My friend, and my fellow sinner, please listen to be: GOD LOVES US. And because of that great love with which He loved us “Jesus himself bore our sins in his body on the (cross), that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.” (1 Peter 2:24)

For “…he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:5-6 ESV)

God says that if you will repent of your sins, turning away from them (that’s the change of heart) and put your trust entirely in what Jesus has done for you, God will forgive you for Christ’s sake. “…whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life”.

That was the message of Jesus to Nicodemus that night, and that is my message to you today: that “to him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

THE IMPACT ON NICODEMUS
This message, that those who believe are those who have been born again, this message had a profound impact on Nicodemus. How do we know that? Well, in the providence of God Nicodemus makes two further appearances in the unfolding story of the life of Jesus in John’s gospel. As John wrote his gospel he tracked the progress of Nicodemus...

THE SECOND ENCOUNTER
In John 7, at some point after that initial encounter with Jesus, Nicodemus was sitting with the other Pharisees in the council and they were discussing what to do with Jesus. More and more people were believing in Him and so the Pharisees had sent some officers to go and arrest Him, and when the officers returned hours later without Jesus the Pharisees said, “Why didn’t you bring Him?” and all these officers could say to them, absolutely dumbfounded by what they had experienced when they got to Jesus to go and arrest Him, all they could say was, “No one ever spoke like this man.” And the Pharisees shouted at them, “Have you also been deceived? Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in Him. These people are cursed!” And in an environment as hostile as that, Nicodemus speaks up in this council meeting:

[50] Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before (that fateful night in John 3), and who was one of them, said to them, [51] “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?” (Nicodemus spoke up for Jesus, he started defending Jesus to these Pharisees) [52] They replied, “Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee. (They turn on Nicodemus. But what they said was not true, by the way! The prophet Isaiah speaking of the Messiah in Isaiah 9 prophesied that those who walked in darkness in Galilee would see a great light – the Pharisees didn’t know their Bible)” (John 7:50-52 ESV)

So we see that Nicodemus began tentatively to stand against the opinions of his fellow Pharisees, to defend Jesus to them. And I pray that for every person in this room, that God would give you all a growing boldness for Jesus that will care more for Him than for your reputation and your power and your money.
THE THIRD ENCOUNTER OF NICODEMUS WITH CHRIST

And then finally, we see Nicodemus again in John 19, right at the end of the gospel of John, after the death of Jesus. The other gospel accounts (those of Matt, Mark and Luke) only mention a man named Joseph of Arimathea who went to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate and asked for permission to take the body of Jesus down from the cross. But in John's gospel, John is at pains to tell us that Joseph of Arimathea was not alone that terrible evening. There was someone else who helped Joseph with the body:

“[38] After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. [39] Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. [40] So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. [41] Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. [42] So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.” (John 19:38-42 ESV)

...Nicodemus had the incredible privilege of climbing up the cross and carrying down that body that he knew had been broken for him. And he got the blood of Jesus all over him, blood that he knew had been shed for the forgiveness of his sins, so that he could be born again, as Jesus had told him he had to be. And he laid the dead body of Jesus in that tomb, and three days later when the tomb was empty he would be one of those who could testify, "This Jesus was truly dead, and He has truly come alive again, just as He said He would.”

A MATTER OF TIME FOR NICODEMUS, AND YOU, KEEP PURSuing

The salvation of Nicodemus took time. It took time for him to commit himself fully, and that is very common. But after that first night when he encountered Christ so dramatically, it was only a matter of time. And that describes some of you in this room here today. Some of you as you have sat here today listening to the words about Jesus have had an encounter with Him, even as I have been speaking. Something has stirred deeply in your heart and you have known that this is the truth and that Jesus is the Saviour of the world.

And like Nicodemus I want to encourage you, keep growing in your boldness and keep coming back. You can arrive late for the service if you want to over the next 6 weeks, slip in quietly, sit in the back, slip out early, avoid any attention. All that is fine, my friend, but listen to me: keep coming back. Because as you hear the Bible preached and taught let me predict what will happen to you... your confidence in this Jesus will grow, just like the confidence of Nicodemus grew, and your shame at being associated with Him will fade away.

The greatest Christian missionary of all time, the Apostle Paul, who once persecuted the church, had a dramatic encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, and that encounter was so powerful that years later, as an old man, Paul would write:

“I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:8)

May that be your testimony, and mine, that we give ourselves entirely to Jesus Christ.