

## **“Collisions: When Religion Collides With Jesus”**

Let's start today with a question. “What if”...What if, one of the worst things that ever happened to you, could be the best thing that ever happened to you? (“What if?”) What if...the hardest thing you have ever gone through, your family has ever gone through, what if that could be the one thing that God uses more than anything else to work good in your life?

What if something that is a mess and broken and busted, what if that is the one area where God decides to demonstrate his beauty and his power and his redemption, more than anything else? Is that possible? Is that even possible?

Today we're starting a series we're calling “Collisions.” It's a different (kind of) title. It's not the kind you naturally think about when you think about the Christian life or about Jesus. A collision brings to mind something that's a mess. It's broken, it's busted; it's crushed. And yet, in the Bible, things that are broken or busted or crushed are made whole in the life and the person of Jesus.

What you have in the gospels (in those stories about Jesus' life) are a collection of collision stories; stories where people meet and come in contact with Jesus. Now, sometimes they never see it coming, like a blind intersection, and their lives are changed forever. Today we're looking at one of those stories.

If you have your Bibles, (a Bible app), turn to John chapter three. Today we're looking at the story of a man named Nicodemus. I want to give you a bit of context here.

Nicodemus was a member of (what was called) the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the religious ruling body of the day. It was made up of seventy-two members, religious leaders, who also served as a group of judges. They operated the courts. They had a high position. Nicodemus was one of these members.

The Sanhedrin, these seventy-two men, there were two parties. It's sort of like the Democrats and the Republicans. (It's something like that.) They had the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The one was more conservative, the other more liberal; and they didn't get along very well. They didn't agree on much. The one thing they did agree on is that Jesus was a threat that needed to be eliminated.

Their biggest concern was to do away with the Son of God, because they don't see him as the Son of God. They see him as someone who is coming in and threatening their tradition, becoming popular with the people. He used to be a carpenter, and now he's a rabbi, and they're becoming jealous.

Nicodemus was one of the Sanhedrin. If you look in chapter three, it says, “Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling Council.”

Now, remember, the Sanhedrin was made up of Pharisees and Sadducees. One of the differences (between the two) was that a Sadducee, (there were other requirements), but a Sadducee, you had to be born into it; it had to be part of your blood line. But a Pharisee, you could earn your way into it. If you studied enough, had the right credentials, the right degree, followed the law. It was like earning a PhD. You could become a Pharisee.

And so, Nicodemus was a Pharisee. Verse two, (it says,) “He came to Jesus at night and said, ‘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.’”

Now, he seems to be humble enough in his approach when he comes to Jesus. He's trying to figure it out. He was just a carpenter, then a rabbi, now he's doing some incredible things. It seems like God is with him. He just wants to know. He's trying to make sense.

I want you to catch (in verse two) this significant note, what it says about when this collision with Jesus takes place. It says, “He came to Jesus at night.” Other translations say “when it was dark.” It's easy to overlook it, like it doesn't matter, but it does.

Why would Nicodemus come to Jesus at night? (I mean, really?) There must have been many opportunities during the day. Why not just pull Jesus aside and talk with him? Jesus was approachable. Or, (if not that), I have to believe Jesus would have been willing to set up an appointment, to catch lunch or some coffee. But instead, he meets with Jesus at night. Why?

Well, for the reasons you might think. At night, no one would see him. At night, he would avoid hard questions from the other religious leaders. At night, he could spend time with Jesus without others knowing. Maybe he could avoid a collision altogether. Maybe he could follow Jesus and it wouldn't have to affect his job. He could keep things (pretty much) as they are.

And so he comes to Jesus at night, hoping that maybe he could just learn about Jesus, follow Jesus, and nothing would have to change? Maybe Jesus would say, "Hey, I'm glad you came to me at night, because this would have been really awkward with your friends and family. Let's just do this. You just repeat a prayer, say you're sorry, change a few things (in your life), and no one will have to know? Maybe we could do it that way, and it would all be good?"

Maybe he thought it might go that way. He could just meet Jesus, follow Jesus, and it wouldn't have to affect his life. But when you read the story, it becomes clear that when you meet Jesus, there's going to be a collision; things cannot stay the same.

And so he says to Jesus, "It seems that you're from God, it's hard for us to make sense of this." In verse three, Jesus shifts the focus, and he says to this religious leader, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Now, I don't want get into (all of) what it means (when Jesus says) you need to be "born again;" this idea that things need to start over. But, if you think about it, just imagine how hard this must have been for Nicodemus to hear. After all, he had spent his entire life doing all of the right things. He'd followed the law. He'd gone to church. He attended all of the classes, the ceremonies. And (now) Jesus is saying to him, "That's not enough; you need to be born again, start over. None of (what you've been doing) is going to get you into the kingdom of God."

Here's what I want you to see. At the intersection of religion and Jesus is where ACHIEVE and RECEIVE collide. At the intersection of religion and Jesus is where (these two ideas), achieve and receive, collide.

Because (often times), that's what happens. What religion says, and this is the way some of you grew up, is "I have to achieve. I have to do more. I have to accomplish. I have to be good enough. If I can be good enough, do enough, accomplish enough, then maybe I'll get in. Maybe there's a chance I'll end up in heaven."

That's what (so much) of this world's religion is about. It's all about achieving. And yet, Jesus comes along (and he says), "No." You can't achieve it. (There's nothing you can do.) It's something you can only receive.

This must have been hard for Nicodemus, because he had spent his entire life achieving; countless hours working at the things you're supposed to do. He had stuffed his pockets with religious currency, and when he pulls it out, Jesus says, "We don't accept that here. That's not what God is looking for."

The Bible says our righteousness (the things we do to try to become right with God) is like filthy rags. It doesn't go very far. For many people, (maybe for some of us) this is hard, because that's what we've been doing. All of those things we've done. We've learned it. We've studied it. We've memorized it. We've gone to church, we're here every Sunday. (It's all good. It's what God wants.) But we pull it out, (all of that currency), and it doesn't work.

For some, this is hard to hear, but we need to hear it. For others, this is good news, because of all the things you've done, the currency you've built up; all of the mistakes, missed steps. Whatever you've earned, you've more than spent. (There's nothing left.) That's when Jesus says, "Now you're ready. Just the way you are." You can't achieve it. You can only receive it." (And it's good news.)

Now, whether you're coming at it from the perspective of Nicodemus (or you have nothing to offer), either way, this should be freeing. It should be really freeing. Because if you've been living under a religious system that tells you, you need to achieve it, it'll wear you out. You've been trying to live for the blessing instead of living from the blessing. There's a big difference.

It's like living in a family where you never measure up. No matter what you do, it's never good enough. So, you keep trying. (A lot of people grew up like that.) It's like being in a marriage where you always have to prove your love to your partner. That's not freeing. It's anything but.

It's not like that with Jesus. He doesn't love you because of who you are. He loves you because of who he is. He loves you. He just loves you, before you do anything; even after you've done nothing. That's the story

of the cross. “While we were yet sinners,” Jesus gave his life for us. We don’t live for the blessing; we live from the blessing. (That’s the first collision we find.)

There’s a second collision (we find), and it’s consistent with the first. At the intersection of religion and Jesus is where PERFORMANCE and AUTHENTICITY collide. At the intersection of religion and Jesus is where performance and authenticity collide.

If you ask the question of the unchurched (in our world), it’s one of their strongest critiques. Right or wrong, accurate or not, it’s what people think. They think of religion and they think it’s all about performance. It’s all about impressing other people, what other people think, about how you look on the outside.

That was true for Nicodemus. For the Pharisees and the Sadducees, it was one of Jesus’ strongest critiques. It’s what people saw. It was all about performance. It was all being done for applause, to impress. Jesus was never impressed. There was nothing authentic.

It doesn’t matter what’s happening on the outside, if there’s nothing (good happening) on the inside. Is it authentic? Is it who you really are? That’s the question. It’s not about performance. It’s about being real.

Now, it’s not always obvious right away. It can (sometimes) take a while. But it doesn’t take too long before you start seeing through what’s nothing more than a mask or a disguise. If a person’s not authentic, not being real, it doesn’t take forever to figure it out. Jesus has already figured it out and he knows we need work.

This is where it gets personal, and not just for you, but for me. Because it’s not about us, it’s about him. It’s not about how we look to others, but about how we look to God, and how God looks to us.

Now, I’m glad things have changed over the years, since (the time) I grew up. But I still remember (as an example), when I grew up, how there was a certain way you were supposed to dress to come to church. (Do you remember that?) It’s not that way anymore.

Some of you still do, you get dressed up; others, not so much. Today, it doesn’t matter. But there was a day when it did; and in that day (when it did), if you didn’t, you were left out. It was part of the tradition. It was the way things were done.

Now, let me ask you a question. Do you think there are still traditions in the church that are not always helpful? Do you think there are things we do (because we’ve always done them) and we love them and they’re all (in themselves) good, but that (nonetheless), get in the way of things we’re called to do?

Here’s where it gets personal; for me, too, because I love our traditions. (I hope you know that.) I really do, as much as anyone. But sometimes we have to decide. Sometimes we have to make a choice.

That leads to the third collision you find in the story. At the intersection of religion and Jesus is where (sometimes) TRADITION and MISSION collide. At the intersection of religion and Jesus is where (sometimes) tradition and mission collide. And (when that happens), you have to decide, which you are going to honor more.

Nicodemus finds himself at a surprising crossroads where he can follow Jesus, or he can continue to do what he’s been doing, but he can’t do both. In the story, Jesus continues to talk with him. This is where we find John 3:16, (“God so loved the world”), and yet we come to the end of the section, and we don’t know what happened. We’re not told what Nicodemus does.

Now, if you keep reading, you come to chapter seven and you find (another story) about the Sanhedrin and how they’re plotting to put Jesus to death. His popularity has grown, and the Sanhedrin is ready to put (it all) to an end. You can just feel the tension mounting in the chapter. It’s this conspiracy and no one is speaking up.

I’ll bet Nicodemus’ hands were sweating. He’s trying to figure out what to say, gain enough courage. He finally speaks out. Chapter seven, verse fifty, (it says), “Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number (in the middle of this conspiracy) he asks, “Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?”

I’ll bet you could hear a pin drop. Seventy-one pairs of eyes looking at Nicodemus; can’t believe what he just said. Who is this man who would come to the defense of this carpenter from Galilee?

What do they do? They take a shot at his ego. (It says), they replied, “Are you from Galilee, too?” Are you from that small, nothing town, with no education? Is that where you’re from?” They go after his pride.

Then (you keep reading), you find one more place (in John’s gospel) where Nicodemus shows up. In chapter nineteen, verse thirty-eight, after Jesus has been crucified, (it says), “Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With

Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night."

John says, "Remember this man who came in secret? It's no secret any longer." It says he came with seventy-five pounds of myrrh and aloes. There was a big cost for Nicodemus. And not just in terms of money. His life collided with Jesus and he couldn't keep doing things as he always did.

Christian tradition tells us that Nicodemus was martyred sometime in the first century. Ultimately, what it came down to for Nicodemus is what it comes down to (for us) right now.

(Here it is.) At the intersection of religion and Jesus is where PRIDE and SURRENDER collide. At the intersection of religion and Jesus is where PRIDE and SURRENDER collide.

I'll be honest. Sometimes, I like religion, because it makes me feel good about what I've done, the position I hold, about being here up front. But that's not the currency that matters.

Following Jesus requires surrender. It requires getting out of the way, and letting it all be about him. (It's not about us.) It's not about achieving, (about what you've done). It's about receiving, and about what he's done.

It's not about performance, and about (how you look) in the eyes others. It's about being authentic and real, and not just (in the eyes of others), but in the eyes God.

And it's not about our traditions (about the things we've always done), but about the mission Jesus has given us, and what we're called to do.

Here's the bottom line. You're finally free; you're finally free. When your religion collides with Jesus, I hope you go with Jesus. Amen.