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# Questions that Lead to Repentance

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I once had the opportunity to view the Milky Way Galaxy on the plains of North Dakota. It was awe-inspiring. Tasked with driving from Minot to Dunseith, I was supposed to return several students from the “big city” back to the small town just 17 miles south of the Canadian border. On a cool summer night, I pulled over and sat on the hood of a car while the students rested, and I enjoyed one of the most breathtaking displays of God’s creation I had ever encountered. A sea of starlight spread across the canopy of black and permeated distances that stretched farther than many lifetimes would ever be able to reach. I saw something that night that I’ve yet to experience since.

The contrast present that night — the stars set in their cosmic orbits to radiate their power for their due season — offers us a startling example of the difference between two key players in John’s Gospel: John the Baptist and Nicodemus.

We all know John the Baptist. A cousin of Jesus, John was set apart in order to “call out in the wilderness” the promise of the Messiah. He led many of his fellow countrymen to repent and become baptized in order to set themselves apart in much the same fashion. Before Jesus is even mentioned by name in the Gospel of John, John the Baptist is mentioned as being a “witness, to bear witness about the light” (John 1:7\*).

John the Baptist witnessed publicly about the light that was to come into the world.

Nicodemus, on the other hand, may not be as self-explanatory. A person of notable importance, Nicodemus served the Jewish people as a leader and a member of the Pharisees (John 3:1). While his political value might outshine that of the poor man in the wilderness, Nicodemus is seen as a considerably more somber individual. Coming to visit Jesus under cover of night, Nicodemus is seen as someone hesitant to be caught in the same circles as Jesus.

Nicodemus secretively hides in the darkness when encountering the source of light.

Nicodemus and John are as night and day to one another. One reaches out in secret; the other proclaims loudly to crowds. One serves at the apex of Jerusalem's socio-political leadership; the other destined to live outside of society. And while we shouldn't demonize Nicodemus himself, both of these men bring to light the true understanding of Christ's call into repentance and discipleship.

First, Nicodemus reminds us that Christ is not afraid of our questions. When met under the cover of darkness, Christ did not send Nicodemus away; Jesus openly extended hospitality into His community of disciples as Nicodemus offered up his inquiries. To some extent, one can see Jesus engaging in the conversation with even more fervor the longer it goes on. Nicodemus begins a dialogue Jesus and then listens to the heart of the entire gospel presented in Jesus' mini-excursus. Christ is open to our questions, no matter how deep they pierce the heart. What He values is the relationship that stems from these interactions.

Second, John reminds us that Jesus has His own questions for us. After the proclamation that Christ is the Lamb of God, Jesus calls two of John's disciples to follow after Him. Yet, before they are allowed to follow and that invitation is even offered, Jesus asks them, "What are you seeking?" (John 1:38). Possibly one of my favorite verses in scripture, Jesus here asks for us to engage in introspection in the process of our calling to be disciples. If Andrew was met with a question even after he said, "Behold the Lamb of God," then how much more will we need to answer God's questions about our desires and our life?

Third, Jesus reminds us that whoever we are (questions, calling, and all), we must come to the light in order to truly live. The Gospel of John utilizes the contrast of Nicodemus and John the Baptist to remind us that we are all still held accountable to flee darkness in order to seek out the light. Both of these key players are not Jesus; neither of them is going to find eternal life in his hands due to anything he has done. No. We are all dependent upon Christ to receive that life and to begin living in the light.

The beauty of that star-scape that I lost myself in is that if I had eternity to watch those lights glimmer and twinkle and enough memory to give them each a name, they would still pass away. Their sparks would eventually die—many have even already died as their light travels through the void to be caught in our eyes. While I can appreciate their beauty and give them value for that moment, they are ultimately reflections of something even greater than what they have to offer. They remind me of the hands that have formed every finite atom that is cyclically caught in the internal fusion deep within the heart of the stars and are witnesses to God’s goodness.

Source(s):

Keith Vande Vrede, “A Contrast of Nicodemus and John the Baptist in the Gospel of John.” *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 57, 4 (2014): 715-726.

\*All Scriptural citations utilize ESV

## Discussion & Reflection:

- 1.) Have you ever had something that you were so afraid to ask that you didn’t dare ask another person but instead you searched it online? What are some of the biggest questions you have ever had about your faith that you might be embarrassed to ask?
- 2.) Christ set a question before Andrew that caused him to think before following him any further. Has God ever asked you a question? What did He ask or how did He lead you toward deeper introspection?
- 3.) Repentance isn’t easy. A lot of us may even fake repentance by not making a full 180-degree turn. What are you proud to say that you left behind in the darkness so you can walk in the light?