

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Son of Man himself, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

My name is Nicodemus. If you ever thought you were confident you know everything you need to know about God, then I have a story for you.

I thought I really knew God. I had diligently studied the writings of what many of you know as the Old Testament. In fact, I can recite not just a verse or two, but many chapters. I was pretty sure I knew what God expected and how he operated. You see, I was part of a special group of people called a Pharisee. Now we're special people, set apart to know and help others know about what God expects. We had the nick name, 'experts in the law' because if anyone needed to know about God and His Law they would come to us. Even if they didn't come to us, we would go to them and let them clearly know what God expected of them.

But on one dark night all this changed... I had heard about this character by the name of Jesus. He had come along out of nowhere, but His reputation was growing. He had been at a wedding where they ran out of wine, and He turned the water that was supposed to be used for ceremonial washing into wine. Who wouldn't want to know this man, especially if you enjoy sweet red wine?

I heard He had also upset the local traders at the temple, and at the same time had made some outlandish claims about how he was going to destroy the

temple, which by the way had been under construction for 46 years, then he had the audacity to say He would rebuild it in 3 days. Then there were the many signs and wonders He performed around the country. I heard he even raised his friend, Lazarus from the dead! No wonder there was a small, but very dedicated group of people following him. What really intrigued me was how much He knew about God, even though he wasn't part of any Pharisee team. In fact, He wasn't part of any respectable group we knew about. He seemed to come from no place at all... Some of my colleagues were very suspicious of Him, they said He was be a threat to the way we go about life, how we understand God, and how much people held us in high regard. Even so, I was intrigued, not just because he did all these things, but because every time he opened his mouth His understanding and teaching of God was unbelievable. It was fresh and new. He spoke with complete authority. It was like He had been sitting with God for centuries. It was like he knew God personally. So, I decided I had to meet him, but I was also worried what my fellow Pharisees would think. So late one night I went looking for him. Fortunately, I found him and the conversation we had changed how I saw God and my view of all people including foreigners and Gentiles.

This meeting with Jesus altered my life. I haven't got time to tell you everything but let me tell you about some of the important things you need to know. For a start I knew Jesus knew his stuff. He could easily recall many of the

old stories of God at work. For instance, He reminded me of an old story of when our ancestors were bitten by deadly snakes in the desert and were dying. God instructed Moses to make a figure of a poisonous snake and place it on a pole. Then God said to Moses anyone who looks at this snake will not die. As the story goes all who followed this instruction lived. Jesus wasn't all about the past, because then He used this story to give me an insight into the future. He talked about eternal life. He made this unbelievable claim that just like the snake was lifted up and all who looked at it lived, He said the Son of Man, would also be lifted up and all who trusted in Him would have eternal life.

Now back then, I had no idea he was talking about to himself, but I was pretty sure He was referring to the Messiah, the one God had already promised to us. It all came together for me on that terrible day when Jesus was lifted up on the cross. This conversation came rushing back to me. I looked at Jesus and thought you are being lifted up, you are the one God sent into the world to save the entire world. That day I dropped to my knees and prayed that what was happening to Jesus would somehow save me.

I can't tell you how much this changed me and my understanding of God and my outlook on our world, including strangers and Gentiles. You see I was a very knowledgeable Pharisee. We had no problems in believing God was giving *us* life after death, but we were pretty sure the only way this was possible, was to

perfectly do everything God had said. Because we wanted a lot of our fellow Jews with us, it was our duty to tell everyone what was the right thing to do and remind them if they didn't do the right thing then they had no possibility of having a good life after death. My conversation with Jesus changed all that. When Jesus said all who believe in the Son of Man who has been lifted up will be saved, my eyes were opened to see that God does things differently. God wasn't offering us eternal life because we did everything perfectly or we could be great performers, rather He was offering us eternal life if we trusted in the One he sent.

This was not the only radical thing Jesus said. Listen to what he said next, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."

Until I had this conversation with Jesus, I thought like many other Pharisees, God only loved Israelites, and only perfect Israelites at that. To be perfectly honest, I was a little scared of God, thinking that if I ever came face to face with him, then he would more than likely point out all my faults and tell me in a loud condescending voice, I wasn't good enough for him. What Jesus had just said revealed to me that God was extremely loving. I don't know why I never knew

this. Our scriptures are full of stories of God's love and forgiveness. In Psalm 121 we're told God never stops caring for us and the Lord is constantly watching over us and protecting us. There was something even more remarkable about what Jesus told me that night, that God's love was for everyone in the world.

It is still ringing in my ears, ... "for God so loved the world." God didn't send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world. This was mind blowing for me at the time. You see I thought God was only interested in helping and saving a small group of people in the world, us Israelites. We thought of ourselves as God's Chosen People... But now Jesus was saying He not only loved everyone, He would dearly like everyone to be saved....on one hand this makes sense, especially when you consider God created the entire world, not just a small part of it. Why wouldn't He want to be reconnected with everyone He created. I'm a process thinker and for my little brain this was logistical nightmare. Can you imagine heaven? All these different people, with their different foods, different tastes in music, different languages, different customs, different personalities. Fortunately, as Jesus lets us know, for us to gain eternal life none of this stuff is important. The only thing that is important is to focus on the Son of Man, which I later discovered was Him.

No longer did I think of God as this great inspector who was going to go over my life with a fine tooth comb, looking to reject or punish me. I now see God

as someone who is looking to show me love constantly, and to use His love to help me connect and reconnect with Him, even and especially when I'm struggling to do so. It also changed how I related to other people and what I needed them to know. As a Pharisee I was convinced my job was to tell people what they were doing wrong and how bad this is, but now after my conversation with Jesus, my focus is to tell people no matter what they've done or failed to do, God is always loving them. All their faults, that would otherwise separate them from God, have been dealt with simply by trusting Jesus' death on the cross and the empty tomb is enough.

Can I encourage you to do the same? Can you help people know they are always loved by God? Can you help me let people know Jesus is God's all embracing love? I believe everyone needs to know this truth about God, that God is everyone's loving powerful king who uses His power to love and save...

May you know how much God loves you... If you spend a little time every day with Jesus your understanding of God will deepen and you will gain a greater appreciation of His love for you. May you also use your understanding of God and His love to help others see the true God, a God of love, who was prepared to send His only Son Jesus into this world so they could know and benefit from His love.
Amen.