

Christ has many secret admirers. Many people will readily acknowledge that there is something laudable about Jesus. They may appreciate some of His teaching or they may have even witnessed answers to prayer. They might be curious about Christ, but not desperate for their lives to change.

Nicodemus was just such a person. He respected Jesus as a wise teacher. He even acknowledged that the miracles which occurred in answer to Jesus' prayers demonstrated that God was with Him. But Jesus knew that seeing miracles or hearing His teaching would never bring about the essential life-change that Nicodemus really wanted. He came secretly, as he had a reputation to maintain. If he was going to associate with Jesus, he wanted to fully understand what he was getting into first. Compare Nicodemus with someone you know who has yet to follow Christ.

John 3:1-2

- ¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews;
² this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."

1. Secret Admirers: Coming to Jesus by night

Like Nicodemus, many God-observant people try to add the teaching of Jesus to their lives. They want to understand more, but they don't want to be misunderstood as some sort of religious fanatic. Thus we find them seeking to encounter the things of Christ privately without the spectacle of coming to a church. Pray for your friend who may be seeking Jesus "by night" in these ways:

- **That they will come to be exposed to the teaching of Jesus** and become curious to learn more.
- **That they will experience answers to prayer** in their life as signs which point to Christ.
- **That they will seek Jesus earnestly**, even if it is "by night." Jesus did not turn Nicodemus away.

John 3:5-8

- ⁵ ...Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.
⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.
⁷ Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'
⁸ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

2. Being born of the Spirit

Nicodemus came to be informed, but Jesus knew he needed to be transformed. In order to experience what God was offering, the required change would be so dramatic that Jesus described it as being "born again." Pray for your friends:

- **That they will find freedom to enter what they may not fully understand.** Pray that amazement or intellectual confusion would not cause them to reject what Christ offers (vs 7). We experience many things that don't have a full explanation, such as where the wind comes from (vs 8). Ask God to provide spiritual "midwives" to help them through the birthing process to the beginning of new life.
- **That they will behold the wonder of the Kingdom of God.** That they will recognize Jesus as more than a nice, wise teacher. He alone is the life-saver and leader (more in John 3:13-15). Jesus gives life under His masterful leadership which He calls the Kingdom of God (vs 3, 5). Pray that they will desire that life.
- **That they will welcome the ongoing work of God's Spirit upon their life.** Pray them forward from their spiritual birthday. Pray for them to love God and become eager to grow in Him.

Focus on particular people: Who is your Nicodemus?

Facilitate a prayer session that will help people take a fresh look at a familiar passage in order to better pray for people who have yet to follow Christ. It may be helpful to begin the prayer gathering with a brief discussion about Nicodemus. Rather than centering your discussion on the theologically complex issue of being “born again,” try to direct the focus of conversation to praying with better understanding for people like Nicodemus.

Invite people to offer observations about what characterizes Nicodemus. A few key ideas may emerge from these observations: He was open and eager to learn more. He respected Jesus and thought God was at work in His teaching (vs 2). He had seen miraculous events and understood them as signs that God was with Jesus in a special way. He had a highly respected position and he chose to come “by night” presumably to protect his reputation. Twice Nicodemus asks “How?” (in verses 4 and 9). He may have been practical-minded, or he may have been an intellectual. Jesus referred to him as “the teacher of Israel” which means he may have had a top-level place as a rabbinical teacher.

Push your participants to identify someone in their circle of influence who respects Jesus, but who, for various reasons is choosing to stay distant from Christ.

Follow the story in prayer: From exposure to Jesus to the experience of Jesus

Direct larger prayer gatherings to form smaller groups of three or four people. Announce that the prayer time will consist of two parts: First we'll pray that God prepares people to meet Jesus by the words and the works of Jesus. Second we'll pray that they are actually changed by the power of God's Spirit to begin a new life.

1. Round One: Coming to Jesus by night

Pray that events would unfold in their lives so that they come to the point that Nicodemus did when he approached Jesus. Pray for God to work in their lives so that all three things take place:

- **Words of Jesus:** That they are freshly exposed to Christ's teaching, even if they've heard the gospel before.
- **Works of Jesus:** That they will experience answers to prayer in Jesus' name.
- **Seeking and meeting Jesus:** That they will have desire beyond casual curiosity to know who Jesus really is.

2. Round Two: Being born of the Spirit

As much as we may pray for God to be glorified in the eyes of our unbelieving friends, answered prayer alone does not bring about God's salvation. That's why it's important to pray that God will move by His Spirit in the lives of those we are praying for, so that they will experience the transforming work of God. Keep the prayers fresh by encouraging people to amplify and paraphrase the biblical ideas instead of just repeating biblical vocabulary. For example:

- **Flat prayers:** It may be perfunctory to pray something like, “May _____ be born again.” or “May _____ enter your kingdom.”
- **Focused prayers:** Urge people to find fresh language to express their desire for God to bring about radical transformation. Form your requests around the ideas of being re-born or around ideas about God's kingdom. Both truths are full of prayer possibilities, such as:

Focus on God's kingdom: Express at least one request that Christ's lordship be experienced.

You might want to read on to John 3:13-15 which describes how Jesus is a figure who saves dying people. He is much more than merely a nice teacher who improves or informs people.

Focus on re-birth: Ask God to provide for spiritual “midwives.” Ask for God's Spirit to be at work far beyond the spiritual birthday. Envision the new life that they will lead as one reborn in God's Spirit.