



This week and next are important weeks for us and God's people everywhere—Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Easter. We've chosen the title of Tomb Raiders as the theme of our sermons for both this week and next, and we will be focusing on four characters in the story of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection: Nic, Joe, Mary and Pete. You might know them by their more traditional names: Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Mary Magdalene and Peter. Each of them play a vital role. Today we will see The Courage of Nic and Joe. At the end of the sermon I am going to give each of you an opportunity to do something courageous yourself sometime this week.

Let's begin our study of Nic and Joe by reading the end of their story.

Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. 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. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds (John 19:38–39).

What's going on here? Who is this guy that's taking care of Jesus' dead body? He wasn't one of the 12 disciples. He wasn't a family member. Joe was a secret disciple who is moving out of the shadows. He is the one who goes to Pilate and asks to bury Jesus according to Jewish tradition.

Joe, as told in Mark 15:43, was a prominent member of the Council, part of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the Jewish ruling council comprised of 70 men, plus the High Priest, selected scribes, elders and Pharisees. They functioned as the Supreme Court of ancient Israel. This is the group of men behind the unjust trial against Jesus and his unlawful execution.

In verse 39 we read that Joe was not acting alone. Nic was with him. Joe and Nic are partners in this endeavor; they're friends. But Nic wasn't one of the 12 disciples either. Nor was he a family member. Nic was also a secret disciple who is moving out of the shadows.

This was their moment to step out of the secrecy, to step out of their fear, regardless of the fallout. This was their moment to finally take a stand.

What I'd like to propose to you is that Joe and Nic were amazingly courageous. Nic and Joe were risking their reputations, their jobs, and their social status to ask Pilate for Jesus' body and then to bury him according to Old Testament rituals. Their friends, the Sanhedrin, just murdered Jesus. There's definitely risk involved revealing that you are a friend of Jesus. That's why all 11 disciples were hiding.

What triggered this step of courage? Why had they been secret followers and now courageous followers of a dead Jesus? Something must have finally clicked for them. I'd like to show you what I think that is.

To do that, let's go back to a conversation between Nic and Jesus. Turn in your Bibles to John 3.

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council (v. 1).

Nic was a Pharisee. But more important for us today, he was part of the Sanhedrin. Did these men know one another? Yes. Did these men sit around a chamber and debate and discuss Jewish laws? Yes. Were both of these men secretly intrigued with Jesus? Yes. Did these men talk with one another about Jesus? Most likely.

He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him" (v. 2).

Because Nic was a secret follower, he was sneaking around at night. Nic is not acting alone. He and some friends, fellow religious leaders, have been watching Jesus perform miracles and listening to his teaching. And they have questions. But it is highly risky for all of them to go to Jesus with their questions, so they had a private meeting and elected Nic to be their spokesperson. It's very possible that Joe was in this conversation. Before Nic can ask his question, Jesus answers him.

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again" (v. 3).

This had to throw Nic off. He knew Jesus was tricky like this. That's why he and his group carefully formulated the questions. Now Jesus is doing his mindreading thing and he's talking about

being born again. So probably with a smile on his face, Nic responds to this born again idea.

“How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit” (verses 4–5).

Born of water refers to natural childbirth. Born of Spirit—this is something new, something interesting.

Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit (v. 6).

This was a new concept to Nic. His concept of God was a rule maker. We follow the rules in order to please God. We are punished if we break the laws. God would determine if you can be part of his kingdom by how well you followed the laws.

Jesus is saying you’ve got it all wrong. No one earns their way in. Only spirit can give birth to spirit. But we’re talking about spiritual birth here. Just like a baby has nothing to do with their conception, you have nothing to do with your spiritual birth. God births it within you.

Nic’s head would have been spinning with this completely new teaching. He’s trying to take it all in so he can report back to his friends later.

You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again’ (v. 7).

Jesus is giving him a reprimand here.

No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man (v. 13).

Jesus is claiming his authority on the topic of seeing and entering the kingdom of God. Since he has been in heaven and come from there, he is a trustworthy authority.

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him (verses 14–15).

Jesus is still talking about seeing and entering the kingdom of God. Earlier he was saying you are born again by the Spirit of God into God’s Kingdom. Now for clarification, Jesus is adding that in order to be born again by the Spirit you must believe.

The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived (Numbers 21:8–9).

The Israelites were on the run from Egypt, traveling through the desert. God was leading them with the pillar of fire and cloud.

One day they stopped and made camp and at night these venomous snakes come out and start biting people. People are dying. The people go to Moses and tell him what’s happening and ask him to pray to God. God tell Moses to construct a bronze snake and put it on top of a tall pole. If a person gets bitten by a snake, they can look to the bronze snake and they will live; they will be healed.

Jesus is making a parallel between the bronze snake and himself. If you looked to the bronze snake you were healed of a snakebite. If you look to Jesus, when he is lifted up, you will be healed... but of what?

This was an interesting conversation between Nic and Jesus. No doubt, Nic had unanswered questions. Can you imagine his conversation when he reported back to his friends? Nic explains and they say, “What does that mean? What else did he say? That’s it? Come on Nic. We expected more info.”

So Nic and his friends—I think Joe was part of this group—decided to keep watching Jesus and continue listening to his teaching. They were pretending not to follow Jesus but they were. And Jesus’ ministry was growing. He was performing more and more miracles. He continued to say very controversial things like, “I know God because I am from him and he sent me.”

The Sanhedrin eventually sends the temple guards to arrest Jesus. They are fed up with the gossip around town that Jesus might be the Messiah. Nic and Joe would have known about this. They would have been part of that discussion; an awkward moment.

Then the Sanhedrin waited for the guards to bring Jesus to them.

Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and the Pharisees, who asked them, “Why didn’t you bring him in?” “No one ever spoke the way this man does,” the guards replied (John 7:45–46).

This is hilarious! Imagine the scene. The guards went to arrest Jesus. Since he was surrounded by such large crowds, they’re waiting for a good opportunity to grab him and they knew the crowds would riot if Jesus was arrested. As they wait, they start listening to Jesus’ words and they are intrigued by them. So intrigued, they decide not to follow their boss’s instructions and arrest Jesus. Instead, they return empty-handed.

“You mean he has deceived you also?” the Pharisees retorted (v. 47).

As a way to reprimand them and insult them they stare at them and say,

“Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law—there is a curse on them” (verses 48–49).

Nic, Joe and the other secret followers of Jesus are in this room as this conversation is taking place. They're wondering, should something be said? They are probably making eye contact with one another, making slight gestures... and Nic speaks up.

Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, "Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?" (verses 50–51).

Nic tentatively steps out of secrecy. He doesn't claim he's a follower of Jesus. He simply tests the waters by asking a question. He is met with an insult.

They replied, "Are you from Galilee, too?" (v. 52a).

Are you a country bumpkin too? And then in a completely mocking tone...

"Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee" (v. 52b).

This was pure mockery because every Pharisee knew that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, not Galilee. And since Jesus was from Galilee, he cannot be the Messiah. Are you that dense? Don't you know that 1+1=2?

For clarification Jesus **did** grow up in Galilee, but he was born in Bethlehem. He **did** meet the prophecies from the Old Testament.

So Nic came out a bit here. He tested the waters and he was shut down. The ministry of Jesus continued to grow and reached a climax when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, after he'd been dead four days. This was the last straw.

Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. "What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many signs" (John 11:47).

In this meeting, the new plan was arranged to arrest Jesus and perform some kind of mock trial with fake testimonies. Nic and Joe would have been in this meeting. There is no record of either of them saying anything.

The temple guard does their job this time. They arrest Jesus. In the middle of the night, Caiaphas, the Chief Priest, holds a completely illegal, rushed trial. Jesus is hurriedly taken, again in the middle of the night, to Pilate. Jesus was whipped, punched and mocked. Yet he made no attempts to defend himself with explanations or miraculous powers. He just absorbed the abuse.

Nic and Joe would have been there watching and observing.

Then Jesus got to the top of the hill where he'd be crucified. A very visible place you could see from all around.

The cross was laid on the ground.

Jesus was laid down on it.

His wrists were nailed to the crossbeam.

His feet were nailed to the center beam.

Then the Roman soldiers pushed the cross from the front while other soldiers pulled with ropes from the back and Jesus was lifted up into the air.

Nic and Joe would have been there, watching and observing, trying to piece everything together.

Is this how it ends?

Maybe he wasn't the Messiah after all.

Did we miss something along the way?

And then ... I think something clicks in their minds. As they see Jesus lifted up on that cross, they recall Jesus' words from that secret, dark of night conversation with Nic.

"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him" (verses 14–15).

In that moment, their confusion turned to clear understanding and their clear understanding fueled a new-found courage. They were not afraid anymore. They would not hide anymore. They would come out of the shadows. That's why they went to Pilate and asked for his body. The Messiah must be buried according to Jewish tradition. That's why they took Jesus' bloody, dead body, carried it to Joe's tomb and wrapped it in fabric and spices.

The importance of their courageous step is astounding. Their courage gives validity to the death of Jesus. Here's why: The dead bodies of crucified men were typically thrown into the dump to slowly rot and decay. In Jerusalem that dump was the Valley of Ghenna. In rare instances a family member might dare to ask for the dead body in order to bury it properly, but only in rare instances. If Jesus would have been thrown into the dump, his resurrection would have been doubted and there would have been little proof to validate that Jesus was actually dead.

But because Nic and Joe acted in courage, we have the irrefutable proof that Jesus was dead, his body wrapped and prepared for burial, his body was left lying on a cold stone slab, the tomb was sealed shut with a giant stone, and a group of Roman soldiers stood guard in front of this tomb.

For Nic and Joe, I think it all came together in their minds when they saw Jesus hanging on the cross.

When did it all come together for you?

Were you reading the Bible alone?

Were you at a church service?

Was a friend, relative or Bible teacher explaining eternal life to you?

Maybe you were reading a book?

When did it all come together?

Let's allow our clear understanding to fuel our courage.

Everyone received an Easter invitation in his or her bulletin. I'd like you to hold it and think about the person God wants you to give it to this week. Now, I know that some of you are scared to give it to the person that came to mind. Let me just encourage you to be courageous. You never know how your courage will impact other people's lives.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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