

# Child of the Wind

From "Into the Danger Zone: Stories from the Life of Christ"  
by Ron Johnson

He feels like a fugitive, walking quietly in the dark, keeping to the shadows. He's not usually out at night, and never by himself. And yet, here he is, covering his face with a shawl in case someone sees him! But he's on an important mission, and it's worth the risk.

He imagines having to defend himself before his own tribunal, the Sanhedrin. "You -- a leader of Israel, skulking around like a thief at night! What on earth were you thinking!"

In his daydream he stands tall and answers with confidence. "I did it for our people. They depend upon us to bring them the word of God. Jesus has something, although I don't know what it is. He's not like us. Whatever he's got, he didn't get it from a book -- not even from the Torah. I had a responsibility to meet him and discover his secret. But if I interviewed him in the daytime, you and everyone else would have interpreted that gesture as an endorsement. I just needed to talk to him. . ."

Nicodemus stops. This is the house where Jesus is staying. If he goes in, he'll cross the boundary of propriety. But if he turns back now, he'll never be able to forgive himself.

He approaches the door and knocks as he was instructed. The man inside nods and lets him in. He is shown a seat, and he waits only a moment before the Nazarene appears. Jesus is quite young, and yet there's something about his eyes that makes him look old and wise, like he's seen everything.

Nicodemus speaks deferentially. “We know you couldn’t do the things you do except by the power of God,” he tells Jesus. That word “we” is a nice touch. Although Nicodemus can’t speak for the other members of the Sanhedrin, he wants to show respect.

But this is no time for polite conversation. “Let me get right to the point,” Jesus says. “Only those who are born again will see the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Nicodemus blinks. “Born again? What do you mean, exactly?”

“Spiritually remade,” Jesus replies. “Nothing short of that will do.”

Nicodemus grimaces. “I don’t get it. Never heard of such a thing. How can somebody start from scratch spiritually? Might as well ask them to climb back into the womb. Can’t be done.”

“Listen,” Jesus tells him. “Do you hear that?”

Nicodemus is quiet a moment. “The wind, you mean?”

“Yes. Seems unremarkable, doesn’t it? It’s a part of our everyday life. And yet, it’s so mysterious. Nobody knows where that gust of wind has been or where it’s going next.” He leans closer. “That’s how *your* life could be, if you were born of the wind -- born of the breath of God!”

“How is that possible?” asks Nicodemus.

Jesus’ eyes challenge him. “You’re a spiritual leader. Don’t you know?”

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For days afterwards, Nicodemus grumbles to himself. “I don’t get it. How can a

person start life over again?”

In *his* culture, it isn't possible (he tells himself). Everybody wears their past like a shroud, especially the remote past. History is as ever-present as the phylacteries that the ultra-religious hang between their eyes. His people never forget who they have been, either as a race or as individuals. Their past identity follows them into every new moment and is sure to hound them to the end of time.

Nicodemus shakes his head. “Start over? Be born again? Impossible.”

Time passes. He thinks about Jesus often, although inconclusively. He just doesn't know what to make of it all. Members of his home congregation frequently run to him with the latest Jesus scandal, expecting him to join them in denouncing the young miracle worker. He always answers these complaints as diplomatically as he can. But deep down he keeps arguing with himself. “A fresh start? Can there be such a thing?”

Again and again they come tattling. Today's visitor is a wealthy old dowager who has way too much time on her hands. She shares her news with great agitation: “Now Jesus has converted a Samaritan woman! I don't know which is worse, the fact that she's a Samaritan or that she's a woman! She's gone through five husbands and this sixth man she never bothered to marry at all. And Jesus accepted her with open arms! Can you imagine!”

Nicodemus stares off into space. Yes. . . *that* he *can* imagine. A woman like that *can* start over again, perhaps. What's she got to lose? Of course, the community will never let her completely forget her sordid past, but if she's willing to change her ways, maybe there's hope for her yet. And all those lepers that Jesus has healed: he's given them a fresh start. They can go back into society as new people, cleansed of their

disease. “But someone like me,” he says to himself, “or this old dowager. . . what other life is there for us than this? What else can we be than exactly what we’ve always been?”

He shakes his head and grins. “Maybe Jesus *can* give new life to those who have *no* life. Good for him! You never know where Jesus is going to turn up next, or what kind of tempest he’ll stir up when he gets there.”

“Rabbi, are you listening to me? I said he sat alone with that sinful woman in broad daylight!”

“Oh, cluck cluck cluck,” Nicodemus mutters.

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As the months go by, he agonizes over the matter. If Jesus had commanded him to leave everything and follow, like the fishermen had left their nets and the tax collectors had left their booths, he honestly doesn’t know what he would have done. He is the shepherd of his people. Would he have left them to follow Jesus? He can’t say for sure. But oddly enough, Jesus didn’t ask him to do that. Instead, he insisted that Nicodemus do something even harder: somehow, he is supposed to be born again -- born of the wind! And if he doesn’t do it, then there’s no hope of his ever entering into the Kingdom of Heaven. He believes in the rehabilitative work that Jesus is doing in people’s lives. In fact, he believes in it more every day. But he just doesn’t see what he’s supposed to do about it.

One day, he’s forced to take a stand. The decisive moment comes during the Feast of the Tabernacles, a religious holiday. Jesus comes to town and a special session

of the Sanhedrin is convened to discuss the Jesus Problem. Nicodemus shifts nervously in his seat as he catches the mood of the room. His cronies don't like Jesus, that's quite clear. Then his heart races at the sudden turn of events: officers are sent out to arrest Jesus and bring him before the tribunal. Within minutes, the Master will be here, facing this group. What will Jesus think when he sees Nicodemus on the panel of judges? Will he assume that Nicodemus has turned against him? Or will he expect Nicodemus to stand in his defense?

Fortunately, he doesn't have to find out. After some delay, the officers return empty-handed.

"Where is the prisoner?" the leaders of the council demand.

The officers are unable to explain what they have experienced. All they can say is, "We never heard anybody talk like him before."

The leaders of the council are furious. "Has he deceived even *you*?" They try to reason with the officers: "You and all the rest of the people he has deceived are ignorant of the Torah. If you knew the Torah, you wouldn't be fooled by him." Making a sweeping gesture around the room, they continue, "Look at this assembly. Here are the nation's greatest authorities on the Torah. You will not find one man here who believes in Jesus."

The moment has come. His duty is now clear.

Nicodemus rises.

With his heart beating wildly, he hears himself ask, "Does the Torah permit us to judge any man before we have let him speak? Does it allow us to condemn anyone before we know the facts of his case?"

The leaders of the council stare at him in disbelief. Then they turn to one another and chuckle. “Is there something you’ve been hiding from us, Nicodemus?”

His mouth goes dry. “I don’t know what you mean.”

The leaders grin at each other again. “Are you part-Galilean or something?”

Everybody laughs, except Nicodemus. It’s a regional insult. The leaders are implying that he isn’t as Jewish as the rest of them, because he’s defending someone from outside Judea. Maybe he’s even part-Galilean himself.

Nicodemus feels his face getting red. “No, of course not.”

“Well, read the scriptures,” the leaders reply. That’s another insult, for Nicodemus is as much of an expert on the Torah as they are. He’s just on the wrong side of this issue. “Read the scriptures,” they say again. “Nowhere do they proclaim that a prophet will come from Galilee.”

Nevertheless, his protest has had its desired effect. No longer sure of its unanimity, the council adjourns. Jesus won’t be condemned today.

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Having risked his reputation before the council, Nicodemus wonders what to do next. It is clear that the leaders of the Sanhedrin want Jesus dead. Is there anything he can do to save the Master? But beneath this comes that deeper question, with greater urgency now than before: “What is my relation to Jesus? And what am I to do about his cryptic invitation to be born of the wind?”

As before, however, circumstances force him to make a decision. It is now

Passover Week, and the leaders of the council again move against Jesus, this time secretly. Proper procedures are ignored. Before most of Israel's religious leaders even know what's happening, Jesus' enemies triumph over him. With the help of an unruly crowd, they pressure the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, to order Jesus' execution. Nicodemus doesn't even hear about it until it's too late.

The news devastates him. He had always thought he would join Jesus someday, although he wasn't sure how or when. Now that's no longer an option.

But still. . .

His conscience keeps telling him that there's one more thing he can do for Jesus. It's ridiculous, but the idea won't go away. He paces and tries to shake it off. "It won't do Jesus any good at this point," he tells himself, "and if I do it, I'll be ruined professionally." But the idea presents itself with great urgency. He can't believe he's going to do this. . .

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The sun has set and Sabbath has begun, but Nicodemus is not at his post. He is neither in the temple nor in any synagogue. He's in the last place anyone would ever think to look for him.

He's inside Jesus' tomb.

He and a small, somber group of women are preparing the Master's body for burial. It's a mutilated body, a body that looks like it has borne the sins of the world. Nicodemus has brought spices, and he and the women have been trying to make the body

presentable. It's a hopeless task.

The women are crying. Based on snatches of conversation, Nicodemus has surmised that one of them is Jesus' mother. He knows it would be kind to say something to her, but he can't think of any words that would be appropriate.

They begin wrapping the body in cloth. This is no work for a rabbi, especially for one who is considered a ruler in Israel. According to the Torah, touching a dead body makes a person temporarily unclean before God. This is the biggest religious holiday of the year, and Sabbath has begun. Just by being in this tomb, Nicodemus has disqualified himself. He has made himself unfit to lead his people in worship. He has even violated the Sabbath. And most importantly, he has, through this action, identified himself as a disciple of Jesus at the very time when Christ's closest followers have abandoned him. For all practical purposes, Nicodemus died today, too. The man he was, he can never be again. He knows that he ought to be very, very afraid. But he is not.

Something happened earlier this evening when he reached out to touch the body of Jesus. He had heard a lot about the Master's healing touch, but today he felt it for himself. Before this evening, he never would've guessed that he *needed* healing, but that's what happened when he held Jesus' crumpled body in his arms. He was healed: healed of his fears, his regrets, his indecision.

And now, as he helps wrap the cloth around and around Jesus' body, he experiences a strange sense of elation. Life as he knows it has just come to an end, and yet he feels more alive than he has ever felt before.

Deep in his soul, a new idea comes to birth, an inner picture he has never before imagined. It is as if God is showing him the blueprint of what's to come. When he



emerges from this tomb, he will no longer be the old Nicodemus. God has other plans for him. He will teach people about Jesus. He will help them find the new life he has found today. But. . . from this day forward, history will lose track of him. His accomplishments will not be memorialized. Although his steps will be divinely-ordered, no one will be able to retrace them. From now on, his comings and goings will be a mystery known only to God.

Today he begins life anew. Today he becomes a child of the wind.

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Questions for Reflection:
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1. Why is it necessary for us to be reborn in order to enter God's kingdom?
2. What do you think Jesus meant about our not knowing where the wind has been or where it's going? What does that have to do with spiritual rebirth?
3. Throughout the story, Nicodemus is perplexed about how a rebirth is possible. How *is* it possible?
4. Is it easier for a person who is down-and-out to be reborn than for a person who is well-placed in society? Why or why not?
5. Should Nicodemus have become a disciple of Jesus earlier than he did? Explain your answer.
6. Considering the personal cost, what good did it do for Nicodemus to help prepare Jesus' body for burial?
7. The Bible tells us nothing more about Nicodemus after his involvement in Christ's burial. In this fictional account, Nicodemus is told that his subsequent

deeds will never be memorialized. Would you be willing to serve Jesus on that basis?