Nicodemus and the Balm of Gilead

Night had given Nicodemus cover the first time he came to Jesus. It had also given him enough quiet to hear a sentence that would follow him for years.

Jerusalem was swollen with pilgrims. Spring had returned, Passover was near, and even after dark the lower streets carried murmurs from crowded houses, the scrape of sandals on stone, and the occasional bleating of animals brought into the city for the feast. Above the noise, on a quiet upper place where the night air moved more freely, Nicodemus came as a ruler, a Pharisee, and a teacher accustomed to being the man who knew where the text was, what the rule said, and how a claim should be tested.

He did not come as a convert. He came as an evaluator who had already conceded one point.

> *"Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him."* - *John 3:2, KJV*

We know.

The words were respectful, but they revealed the posture. Nicodemus had come from the side of the table that examined other men. Jesus did not argue about whether He had passed the examination. He moved immediately to the man examining Him.

> *"Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."* - *John 3:3, KJV*

Nicodemus blinked. Birth had a direction. Age had a direction. Flesh did not walk backward into its beginning. He reached instinctively for mechanism because mechanism was what an educated man could test.

> *"How can a man be born when he is old?"* - *John 3:4, KJV*

Jesus gave him water. Spirit. Birth. Kingdom. Wind that could be heard without being controlled. Familiar words, but not a process Nicodemus could perform on himself.

> *"Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."* - *John 3:5, KJV*

The rooftop seemed smaller. Nicodemus knew washings. He knew clean and unclean. He knew what a priest did, what a worshipper brought, what a judge heard, what an obedient Israelite was commanded to keep. But Jesus was speaking about something done at the level of the man himself - something God must give.

> *"How can these things be?"* - *John 3:9, KJV*

The question came out before Nicodemus had a better one. Jesus looked at the man who had spent a lifetime teaching Israel.

> *"Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?"* - *John 3:10, KJV*

That sentence landed harder than a public insult because it contained a possibility Nicodemus could not dismiss: if he should know, perhaps the answer was already in the Scriptures he taught. He may have known every word and still missed what the words were doing.

When Nicodemus walked home, the feast city was quieter but not asleep. Smoke from evening fires clung low between stone walls. Somewhere a child laughed. Somewhere an animal protested its tether. The temple still stood. Rome still governed. The same scrolls remained in the same places. Nothing around him had changed. But the old teacher no longer stood in the same relation to the words. Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?

A proud man could have spent the next morning explaining why the younger teacher had been unfair. A serious teacher could do something more dangerous. He could open the scroll again. Water. Spirit. A new beginning. Life that had to come from God. Ezekiel was not far away.

> *"Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean... A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you... And I will put my spirit within you..."* - *Ezekiel 36:25-27, KJV*

Nicodemus read more slowly than he remembered reading before. I will sprinkle. I will cleanse. I will give. I will put within. The verbs belonged to God. The night conversation had sounded impossible because Nicodemus had searched for the human technique. Ezekiel did not give him one. Ezekiel gave him a God who could reach inside a man and make new what law written outside the man could not manufacture. He read on.

> *"Son of man, can these bones live?"* - *Ezekiel 37:3, KJV*

Dry bones did not need instruction. They needed life.

> *"O Lord GOD, thou knowest."* - *Ezekiel 37:3, KJV*

Nicodemus leaned back and stared at the words. Ezekiel did not pretend to know how either.

> *"And shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live."* - *Ezekiel 37:14, KJV*

The answer stayed with him. He still did not know what Jesus meant. But he was beginning to learn a different answer to impossible questions: the absence of a mechanism in his own mind was not proof that God had no mechanism. Then another line from the night returned.

> *"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up."* - *John 3:14, KJV*

Numbers 21 was familiar. Dying Israelites looked toward what God appointed and lived. But Jesus had inserted Himself into the story and left Nicodemus with a word that refused to explain itself.

Lifted up.

Lifted where? Lifted how? Why would belief meet life there? He could not answer. So he did something the old Nicodemus would have disliked. He left the clue unresolved.

Weeks became months. The spring crowds thinned. Summer heat baked the streets pale and hard. Dust gathered in the folds of travelers' garments and in the creases of sandals. Reports kept coming south from Galilee, sometimes carried by pilgrims, sometimes by men who had gone only to see whether the stories were exaggerated and returned arguing harder because they were not. Blind men saw. Lame men walked. The deaf heard. The dead were raised.

> *"Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart."* - *Isaiah 35:5-6, KJV*

The prophets were beginning to sound like current events. Another feast season came. Then another. Nicodemus heard Jesus discussed in courtyards, in shaded colonnades, around tables, and in rooms where men lowered their voices before saying His name. He learned to listen for the old words inside the new reports. Then came another report he could not file away neatly: Jesus had spoken of manna and called Himself the bread of life.

> *"I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger."* - *John 6:35, KJV*

Bread from heaven belonged to Israel's wilderness memory. Jesus had not merely compared His teaching to bread. He had placed Himself where the bread stood. Nicodemus stored the word.

Bread.

Another piece without the picture. By the time the feast crowds filled Jerusalem again for the autumn gathering, the arguments had hardened. Officers sent to seize Jesus returned without Him because, they said, never man spake like this man. The room answered with contempt. Robes brushed against one another as men shifted forward. Voices overlapped. The air inside the chamber seemed warmer with every accusation. Nicodemus listened to men who were certain they knew enough. He recognized the posture.

"Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth?" - *John 7:51, KJV*

The room turned toward him. For a moment there was only the scrape of a sandal and the faint hiss of someone drawing breath through his teeth. Then the mockery came. Nicodemus did not win the room. He did not stand and announce that Jesus was the Messiah. He asked for something smaller and, in that room, more dangerous: hear Him before you judge Him. The man who had come to Jesus saying we know had begun telling the men who thought they knew that they had not heard enough.

His questions were no longer entirely private. Months passed again. The seasons turned. Jesus did not disappear, and neither did the division around Him. Nicodemus heard more sayings that seemed impossible to keep in one category. Before Abraham was, I am. I lay down my life, that I might take it again. Men tried to stone Him. Others said no deceiver opened blind eyes. The more Nicodemus listened, the less comfortable the old boxes became. Then spring returned to Jerusalem.

Passover again.

The city swelled until every road seemed to pour people toward the temple. Lambs and kids were led through the streets. Unleavened bread was prepared in crowded houses. Smoke and cooking fires mingled with dust. Priests, pilgrims, merchants, soldiers, families, beggars, children - Jerusalem became a living memory of Egypt, deliverance, blood, haste, and a night Israel was commanded never to forget. And before the feast was finished, Jesus was taken.

The proceedings moved through darkness and early morning so quickly that by the time Nicodemus understood how far things had gone, Roman soldiers were already involved. Men who had mocked his question about hearing Jesus had found another way to hear Him. Without Nicodemus in the room. By afternoon the city felt wrong.

The light had failed before the day should have dimmed. The sky pressed low and strange over Jerusalem. The heat remained trapped against the stone, but the darkness changed the voices. Mockery came in bursts now instead of a constant roar. Soldiers still did their work with the practiced boredom of men assigned to death, leather creaking, metal striking metal, but even they glanced upward more often than before.

Nicodemus stood near enough to smell dust, sweat, blood, and the sour bite of wine. Somewhere toward the city, festival animals still cried from courtyards and temple approaches. Passover had not stopped because Rome had raised three crosses. He looked at the board above the center one.

JESUS OF NAZARETH
THE KING OF THE JEWS

He had read the words several times. They refused to become ordinary. Nazareth. King.

The King bothered him first. John had not yet told him what happened at the supper, but the old priest-king had already begun to stir in memory. Melchizedek. King and priest. Bread and wine. Psalm 110: David's Lord, rule at the right hand, priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. Zechariah pressed in behind it: the Branch bearing glory, ruling, and somehow being a priest upon His throne, the counsel of peace between them both. Then Nicodemus looked at Nazareth again. Something was wrong. Not false. Incomplete.

Mary stood near the cross. Her face had the stillness of a woman who had spent more tears than her body could replace and yet had not moved because leaving would be worse. John was near her. Nicodemus

knew him by sight and reputation, one of the men who had stayed close to Jesus when closeness became dangerous. Nicodemus looked at the sign, then at Mary, then back at the sign. Micah arrived before the question did.

> *"But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah... out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel."* - *Micah 5:2, KJV*

His mouth opened slightly. He turned toward Mary so quickly John shifted his weight, watching him. Nicodemus took one half-step closer, then remembered himself and stopped. He would not touch her. He could barely breathe.

"He was not born in Nazareth."

Mary looked at him. Nicodemus stared as though the answer had already been spoken.

"Bethlehem."

Her grief broke for one instant into surprise.

"How could you know that?"

Nicodemus laughed once, but nothing was funny. It escaped him like a gasp.

"Bethlehem Ephratah," he whispered. "Out of thee... the ruler."

He looked up. THE KING OF THE JEWS. A huge grin started across his face, almost indecent beneath an execution. The skin beside his eyes folded until the eyes themselves nearly disappeared. Then he saw Jesus again and the grin collapsed under grief.

"Bethlehem," he said again, softer.

Mary stared at him. John stared at him. Nicodemus was already moving to the next line.

"There was danger there," he said.

Mary's expression changed. Nicodemus's lips moved soundlessly.

Rachel.

Ephrath.

Children.

Weeping.

> *"A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rachel weeping for her children..."* - *Jeremiah 31:15, KJV*

He looked back at Mary.

"Herod."

Mary did not answer immediately. Nicodemus saw the answer before she gave it.

"You left before the children were killed."

Her eyes filled anew.

"Yes."

Now John leaned closer. Nicodemus's breathing came faster. The prophet gave him the next fact.

> *"When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt."* - *Hosea 11:1, KJV*

He looked sharply at Mary.

"Egypt."

She frowned through tears.

"What?"

"You took the child into Egypt."

Mary looked at John as though John might explain what was happening. John did not.

"Yes."

Nicodemus exhaled a sound that was half laugh and half sob.

"Called my son out of Egypt..."

"Who told you?"

"Hosea."

Mary's surprise had become unease. Nicodemus was saying things about the hidden beginning of her son's life that she had not told him. Then another line caught him so hard he stopped breathing for a moment.

> *"Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."* - *Isaiah 7:14, KJV*

His eyes lifted slowly to her. The muscles in his jaw loosened. His mouth remained slightly open.

"The virgin..."

Mary's face changed. Nicodemus lowered his voice until John had to lean in to hear him.

"You."

Mary stared.

"How could you possibly know?"

Nicodemus shook his head, overwhelmed.

"Isaiah."

Then, almost under his breath, not really speaking to either of them, he began counting obstacles.

"Adam... death. Coniah... the royal line under judgment. But the promise... not the man's seed. The woman. Her seed."

Genesis opened behind his eyes.

> *"I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed..."* - *Genesis 3:15, KJV*

Nicodemus looked at Mary again, and this time the astonishment in his face frightened her less because grief had returned with it.

"Your family," he said. "David?"

Mary nodded slowly.

"Through Nathan. David's son."

She started to continue.

"Nathan, son of David, son of Jesse -"

Nicodemus interrupted without intending rudeness.

"Jesse. David. Judah."

His hand went to his forehead.

"The Branch of Jesse. The throne of David. Of course."

He realized he had spoken over her and looked embarrassed for half a heartbeat.

"Forgive me. And Joseph? What line?"

"Joseph is also of David's house. His line runs through Solomon."

Nicodemus's eyes narrowed.

"Solomon... and Coniah."

The warning in Jeremiah returned: no man of Coniah's seed prospering upon David's throne. He looked back at Mary.

"But Joseph did not beget Jesus."

"No."

"He received Him?"

Mary nodded.

"He named Him?"

"Yes."

Nicodemus went perfectly still. John had seen that look enough times in the last few minutes to know another scroll had opened.

"Ephraim and Manasseh," Nicodemus whispered.

John blinked. "What?" Nicodemus barely heard him. Jacob's words came back, spoken over Joseph's two sons in Egypt.

> *"Thy two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh... are mine; as Reuben and Simeon, they shall be mine."* - *Genesis 48:5, KJV*

Nicodemus looked at Mary, then at Jesus.

"Jacob took sons he had not begotten and gave them standing as his own sons in the house."

Mary watched him carefully.

"Born through Nathan's branch," Nicodemus murmured. "Received and named into the royal house through Solomon's branch."

He looked up at the sign again. THE KING OF THE JEWS. Nicodemus did not stop to solve every legal question. There was no time. He only saw that Israel's own Scriptures had already taught him that birth, naming, inheritance, and received sonship could carry real covenant consequence. Another impossibility had become less impossible.

"After Egypt," Nicodemus said, "you came back."

Mary nodded. He closed his eyes. Zebulun. Naphtali. The way of the sea. Beyond Jordan.

> *"Galilee of the nations. The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light."* - *Isaiah 9:1-2, KJV*

His eyes opened.

"Galilee."

Mary's surprise was no longer momentary.

"Yes."

"And Nazareth. That is where you stayed."

Another nod. Nicodemus looked up at the board. Nazareth was true. It was simply the final public label on a road that began in Bethlehem, passed through Egypt, and returned into the very Galilee Isaiah had named. And Isaiah 9 did not stop at light.

> *"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder... Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David."* - *Isaiah 9:6-7, KJV*

Child.

Son.

Government.

David.

Nicodemus looked again at the cross. KING OF THE JEWS. For one breath everything aligned. Then he saw the nails and could not make the King and the dying man occupy the same thought without pain. A refuge thought flickered at the edge of his mind. Kedesh in Galilee, in Naphtali. Shechem in Ephraim. Golan in Bashan, Manasseh. Six sanctuary cities spread through Israel by one law of blood guilt, one strange release when the high priest died. Joseph's double portion itself held two of the cities.

Could the refuge roads be speaking to one another? Could blood guilt, priesthood, Joseph's double portion, and release be moving toward one death? He did not answer. He did not even say it aloud. The thought was too large and the moment too fast. He let it remain a question for another day. But Galilee had opened another passage.

> *"Thou art my servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified."* - *Isaiah 49:3, KJV*

Nicodemus had always known how to hear Israel in the prophets: Jacob's descendants, the covenant people, God's servant nation. Then the Servant spoke of bringing Jacob back.

> *"It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth."* - *Isaiah 49:6, KJV*

Nicodemus's forehead tightened. The Servant was called Israel. The Servant restored Israel. And the Servant became light to the nations. Galilee of the nations. Great light. He looked at Jesus.

"How can Israel restore Israel?" he whispered.

The old question from the night answered from somewhere inside him.

How can these things be?

This time the question did not feel like an objection. It felt like a doorway. From the cross came another promise, this one spoken to the dying man beside Jesus.

> *"To day shalt thou be with me in paradise."* - *Luke 23:43, KJV*

Paradise. Garden. The word lodged beside Ezekiel's promise of desolation becoming like Eden, but Nicodemus had no time to follow it. A cry from the cross interrupted him.

"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" - *Psalm 22:1 / Matthew 27:46, KJV*

Nicodemus's head snapped upward. Psalm 22. He knew the opening. He knew enough of the rest that several lines began pressing forward at once, but Jesus was still breathing and the scene would not let Nicodemus sit down with the psalm. He heard mockers nearby and remembered, He trusted on the LORD that He would deliver Him. He saw soldiers below the crosses and remembered garments divided and lots cast. He stored the rest. John was beside Mary. Nicodemus turned to him.

"You were with Him last night."

John nodded.

"Tell me."

John hesitated, glanced at Mary, then at Jesus, as though speaking about a supper while the host hung above them felt impossible.

"We ate together."

Passover pressed around the word. Somewhere down toward Jerusalem a lamb bleated, thin and high in the strange darkness. Smoke from the city drifted faintly on the air.

"He took bread," John said.

"Take, eat; this is my body." - *Matthew 26:26, KJV*

Nicodemus's eyes closed for a heartbeat.

Bread.

The old John 6 clue returned. Manna. Bread from heaven. I am the bread of life.

"Then the cup," John said.

"This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many." - *Matthew 26:28, KJV*

Body.

Blood.

Melchizedek flashed again: bread and wine in the hands of a king who was also priest. Psalm 110 answered: priest forever. The board over Jesus still said King. Zechariah's priest upon the throne flickered once more and vanished into the next thought. A lamb cried again somewhere beyond the hill, and Egypt unfolded in Nicodemus's mind without permission.

Israel, God's firstborn son. Blood on the doors. Judgment passing over. A people leaving bondage before they understood the road ahead. That month becoming the beginning of months. Then the sea. Water in front. Egypt behind. No human mechanism. A strong east wind - ruach - moving through the night until the waters stood apart and a road appeared where no road had been.

Water.

Ruach.

Spirit.

Nicodemus opened his eyes. This is what He said to me. He did not force the sea into Jesus's meaning. The memory simply taught him again what Ezekiel had taught him: God could create a way where a man had none.

"What happened after the supper?" he asked.

"We went to a garden."

The word garden caught for a moment, but John kept going.

"Judas came with officers and soldiers."

"You saw it?"

"I was there."

John swallowed.

"They came looking for Jesus of Nazareth."

Nicodemus glanced up at the sign.

"He stepped toward them," John said.

"Toward them?"

John nodded. "He asked whom they sought."

"And?"

"They said, Jesus of Nazareth."

Nicodemus waited. John's voice lowered.

"He said, 'I am.'"

Nicodemus went still.

"Not, I am he?"

"I heard Him. I am."

John added the part he still did not understand.

> *"As soon then as he had said unto them, I am he, they went backward, and fell to the ground."* - *John 18:6, KJV*

"They fell?"

"All of them."

Something moved across Nicodemus's face.

"John... He said it before."

John knew which saying he meant.

> *"Before Abraham was, I am."* - *John 8:58, KJV*

Abraham.

Moses.

The bush.

The One who sent Moses. The wording from the bush was fuller than the two words John had heard, but the echo struck Nicodemus all the same. Jesus had placed Himself before Abraham, and in the garden armed men had fallen backward when He answered, I am. Nicodemus pressed his fingertips to his temples as though the thoughts were physically too loud.

"What else?"

John glanced away.

"He told us we would scatter."

> *"Smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered."* - *Zechariah 13:7, KJV*

John's mouth tightened.

"He gave us the Scripture. Then we did exactly what He said."

Nicodemus did not rebuke him.

"What else?"

John looked at the dying Jesus.

"He said... after He was risen, He would go before us into Galilee."

Nicodemus caught John's forearm.

"After He was what?"

"Risen."

"And He said Galilee?"

John nodded. Nicodemus's breath came short. Isaiah 9 returned: Galilee of the nations. Great light. Isaiah 49 returned: the Servant called Israel, restoring Israel, light to the Gentiles, salvation to the ends of the earth. Behind them stood Abraham and the promise that blessing would move beyond one household to the nations.

"He said more," John admitted, because Nicodemus was looking at him as though every forgotten sentence now mattered.

> *"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."* - *John 2:19, KJV*

Nicodemus's eyes widened.

> *"A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me."* - *John 16:16, KJV*

John shook his head. "We argued about what He meant."

> *"I lay down my life, that I might take it again."* - *John 10:17, KJV*

Nicodemus stared at him.

"He said that?"

"Yes."

The Servant in Isaiah was cut off and yet saw His seed, prolonged His days, and prospered. Jesus told John He would rise. He would be seen again. He would meet them in Galilee. He would lay His life down and take it again. Then the voice from the rooftop returned with such force that Nicodemus looked straight up.

> *"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life."* - *John 3:14-15, KJV*

Lifted. He had carried the word for years. Now the Son of man was literally above him. The serpent in the wilderness, the woman's seed, belief, life - the pieces had reached the cross. The darkness deepened around them. Then Jesus spoke again.

> *"It is finished."* - *John 19:30, KJV*

The words were not loud enough to belong to a conqueror. They came from a body nearly spent. Yet He did not say, It has failed. He bowed His head. The Teacher who had spoken to Nicodemus about life died. For one terrible instant the hill seemed to hold its breath. Then the earth moved.

Stone shifted under Nicodemus's sandals. Someone cried out. A soldier threw one hand against the upright wood beside him. Dust leapt from the ground. Rocks answered somewhere beyond the crosses. The people who had come to watch death suddenly had to keep their balance. Nicodemus felt the quake through his legs before his mind found the memory.

Sinai.

Thunder. Thick cloud. Smoke. The mountain trembling. Israel trembling below it.

> *"And the whole mount quaked greatly."* - *Exodus 19:18, KJV*

The ground settled, but nothing inside Nicodemus did. Passover animals cried somewhere toward the city. The feast was still moving. Blood. Firstborn. Deliverance. Water. Ruach. A people brought out by the hand of God. And above Nicodemus hung the Man who had told him he must be born of water and Spirit. The pieces did not merely fit now. They rushed at him. He turned on John and caught him by both shoulders. John stiffened.

For the first time that day, Nicodemus smiled without restraint. It was huge, almost absurd, on an old man beneath an execution. His eyes squeezed nearly shut. New vertical lines appeared beside them. A tear ran down one cheek while he was still grinning. His breath came too fast. John was beginning to wonder whether revelation and grief had broken the master of Israel at the same moment.

"John."

"Nicodemus?"

"Do you remember what He said to me?"

John looked lost. Nicodemus shook him once, not hard, but with the excitement of a friend who could not make another man see fast enough.

"At night. He said, 'Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?'"

John nodded slowly. Nicodemus laughed once - a breathless gasp.

"I know now."

John's concern increased.

"You know what?"

The smile broke when Nicodemus looked back at Jesus. His mouth trembled. Then he looked directly into John's eyes.

"I know who He is."

Another thought struck him so suddenly he nearly laughed again.

"John... in the beginning - the Word!"

John blinked.

"What?"

Nicodemus tightened his grip, delighted that the answer seemed obvious and horrified that John could not see it yet.

"Don't you see? The Word is the light!"

John's expression became actively worried.

"The... Word is the light?"

"Galilee! The nations! The light in darkness - life -"

Nicodemus stopped mid-sentence. His eyes fell to the wounds.

Purpose replaced exhilaration.

"I have to go."

"What?"

He released John and turned downhill with a speed that did not belong to his age.

"Nicodemus!"

He kept moving.

"Where are you going?"

"I need something!"

"The spices are already here!"

Nicodemus turned just long enough to call back.

"Something for a wound!"

Then he was gone. John looked at Mary. Mary looked at John. Neither knew whether the old teacher had finally understood everything or lost his mind in public. The streets below Golgotha were still crowded, but the earthquake had changed the way people moved. Some hurried toward the city. Others stood in knots speaking too loudly because fear made silence harder. Nicodemus pushed through them, old knees complaining, breath burning in his chest, robe gathered in one hand so he would not trip.

The smell of Passover clung to the streets - smoke, bread, animals, sweat - but another smell had already fixed itself in his memory: blood and sour wine beneath a darkened sky. He knew where the myrrh and aloes were being gathered. John had been right about that. They were not what he needed. He needed something a sane man did not buy for a corpse.

By the time Nicodemus returned, the light had begun to move toward evening. Joseph of Arimathaea had come back from Pilate, and the body was being released for burial. The extraordinary quantity of myrrh and aloes made the devotion visible before anyone counted it. Beside them Nicodemus set another vessel, smaller, sealed, and costly enough that Joseph noticed it immediately. Joseph's face said his interview with Pilate had not gone the way a request for a corpse was supposed to go.

"He gave you the body?" Nicodemus asked.

Joseph nodded.

"After he made sure."

> *"And Pilate marvelled if he were already dead: and calling unto him the centurion, he asked him whether he had been any while dead."* - *Mark 15:44, KJV*

"He would not release Him until the centurion confirmed it," Joseph said. "Then he gave me permission."

Nicodemus waited. Joseph had not finished.

"What?"

Joseph glanced back toward the city and lowered his voice.

"Nicodemus, I have stood before men with power. Councillors. Governors. Men who know that a room changes when they enter it. They are steady, or cold, or calculating, or flat-out angry. Pilate was none of those things."

"I saw him wash his hands."

"I know. I mean afterward. When I went back."

Joseph rubbed one thumb along the edge of his palm as though remembering his own discomfort.

"He kept talking after I had stopped asking questions. Half of it came in pieces. Something about a kingdom. Something about truth. Something about this being the end for which Jesus had been born. Then he would stop in the middle of a sentence and stare at one place in the room."

"What place?"

"At first I did not know. Then I realized it must have been where Jesus had stood."

Nicodemus said nothing.

"Most of his words were scattered," Joseph continued. "But every time he returned to one question, he became completely clear. It was as though he was there again."

Joseph's posture changed. His voice flattened, imitating the Roman as best he could.

> *"Art thou the King of the Jews?"* - *John 18:33, KJV*

Nicodemus's eyes lifted sharply. The sign returned. THE KING OF THE JEWS.

"Pilate said Jesus looked up at him through the beating and answered."

> *"Thou sayest it."* - *Matthew 27:11, KJV*

Joseph swallowed.

"Pilate said the whole room felt wrong after that. He kept staring at the place where Jesus had been standing."

"What else did Jesus say?"

Joseph searched his memory.

> *"My kingdom is not of this world."* - *John 18:36, KJV*

Nicodemus breathed out slowly.

"A King," he said, "but not the kind Pilate knows how to locate."

"Then Pilate kept repeating another line."

"Which line?"

> *"To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth."* - *John 18:37, KJV*

Nicodemus froze.

Born.

Mary's face returned. Bethlehem. The virgin. Nathan. David. Egypt. Galilee.

"He said born?"

"That is what Pilate told me."

"And came into the world?"

Joseph nodded. Nicodemus's mouth opened, but no words came. Mary had told him where Jesus was born. Pilate had heard Jesus say why He was born. Joseph continued.

"They told Pilate He made Himself the Son of God. That frightened him. I think the fear was still there when I saw him."

Nicodemus remembered the governor in the courtyard, the washing of his hands, the way he had looked less like a man cleansing himself than a man trying to place distance between himself and what was about to happen.

"There was another thing," Joseph said. "Pilate kept repeating that Jesus told him his authority was not really his."

> *"Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above."* - *John 19:11, KJV*

"From above," Nicodemus murmured.

Again that direction. Life from God. Authority from God. A kingdom Rome could not locate by tracing roads to Caesar. Joseph nodded toward the body.

"Then the centurion finally came and confirmed He was dead. Pilate was amazed He had died so soon. He questioned the man again. When he was satisfied, he released the body to me."

Joseph paused.

"But Nicodemus... Pilot did not look relieved."

Neither man tried to explain Pilate. The Roman governor had become an unwilling witness to a conversation he could not settle in his own mind. Joseph finally looked down at the extra vessel.

"What did you bring?"

Nicodemus placed one hand over the seal. Joseph recognized it.

"Is that Gilead?"

"Yes."

"Balm?"

"Yes."

Joseph looked from the jar to Jesus.

"Nicodemus... that is for healing."

The enormous smile from Golgotha did not return. Nicodemus's expression became quiet.

"Exactly."

Joseph stared at him.

"We are preparing a dead body."

"I know."

Nicodemus was not pretending Jesus had not died.

"Then why healing balm?"

Nicodemus looked at Jesus.

"Help me turn Him."

The garden was cooler than the hill. Evening air settled among leaves and stone. The tomb itself held the day's coolness in its walls. Myrrh and aloes already scented the linen and their hands, heavy and bittersweet. Outside, Jerusalem still carried Passover noise. Inside the garden, every movement became deliberate.

Paradise returned. Then Ezekiel: the desolate land becoming like the garden of Eden. Nicodemus looked from leaves to stone to the dead Man in their arms and felt the contradiction without trying to solve it. A garden had become the place of burial. One man supported the shoulders. The other took the weight. They turned the body enough to begin cleaning and wrapping what the scourging had left behind. Nicodemus stopped. Joseph felt his hands stop and looked at him.

"What?"

Nicodemus stared at the back. His lips moved before sound came.

> *"With his stripes we are healed."* - *Isaiah 53:5, KJV*

Joseph looked down again. Nicodemus's fingers trembled.

"Don't you see, Joseph?"

"See what?"

Nicodemus's voice broke.

"He was wounded for our transgressions. Bruised for our iniquities."

> *"He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities... and with his stripes we are healed."* - *Isaiah 53:5, KJV*

The words did not float above the scene. They were under their hands. They turned Him again, cradling the head. The face was swollen, bloodied, altered by hours of abuse.

> *"His visage was so marred more than any man."* - *Isaiah 52:14, KJV*

Nicodemus's mouth quivered.

"Isaiah."

Joseph heard the name differently now. Another Servant line followed: back given to smiters, face not hidden from shame and spitting. Nicodemus did not inventory every injury. He did not claim to know what every blow had done. He did not need to. The Servant text had become tactile. Then the psalm Jesus had cried from the cross began to open.

> *"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"* - *Psalm 22:1, KJV*

Nicodemus had heard the first line from Jesus Himself. Now, with the body beneath his hands, the rest came in order.

> *"He trusted on the LORD that he would deliver him: let him deliver him."* - *Psalm 22:8, KJV*

The mockery.

> *"All my bones are out of joint."* - *Psalm 22:14, KJV*

They shifted the body carefully. Nicodemus felt how violence had pulled at shoulders, wrists, elbows, and hips. The crucified body itself made the verse vivid.

> *"They pierced my hands and my feet."* - *Psalm 22:16, KJV*

The wounds were visible.

"They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture." - *Psalm 22:18, KJV*

John had seen the soldiers do it. Joseph looked at Nicodemus.

"The same psalm?"

Nicodemus nodded.

"Keep reading."

"All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the LORD: and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before thee." - *Psalm 22:27, KJV*

Joseph went still. Wounds. Mockery. Piercing. Garments. Then the nations. Galilee flashed through Nicodemus again. Great light. Isaiah 49: salvation to the ends of the earth. Abraham: blessing to the families of the earth.

"The psalm does not end with the body," Nicodemus said.

John had told him what happened when the soldiers came to finish the executions. Legs broken on the other crosses. Not on Jesus.

"A bone of him shall not be broken." - *John 19:36, KJV*

Passover returned with almost physical force.

The lamb.

No bone broken.

Psalm 22. Bones out of joint.

Out of joint.

Not broken.

Nicodemus looked at Joseph.

"Do you see the difference?"

Joseph did. There were too many of these moments now for either man to pretend coincidence was the easiest explanation. They lifted Jesus toward the new tomb. Joseph owned it. New. Cut in stone. A rich man's grave close enough to use before the day closed. Nicodemus stopped at the entrance and looked from the tomb to Joseph.

"And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death." - *Isaiah 53:9, KJV*

Joseph frowned. Nicodemus pointed into the tomb with one trembling hand.

"Joseph."

"What?"

"You are standing in the verse."

For the first time Joseph looked unsettled for a reason that had nothing to do with Pilate. The condemned Man executed among criminals was being placed in a rich man's new tomb. The Servant text had reached the architecture around them. Joseph watched Nicodemus work myrrh and aloes into the linen and finally asked the question that had been waiting since the jar appeared.

"Even if all of this is Him - what does it mean now?"

Nicodemus looked down at Jesus. John's sayings moved again: rise. Galilee. Raise the temple. See Me again. Lay down life and take it again. Then Nicodemus remembered another public day, another town, another scroll.

"Joseph... He stopped reading."

"What?"

"Nazareth. Isaiah. He stood to read in the synagogue."

> *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... to preach good tidings unto the meek... to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD."* - *Isaiah 61:1-2, KJV*

"He closed the book there," Nicodemus said.

Joseph waited. Nicodemus's eyes were bright again.

"But Isaiah does not stop there."

> *"And the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn."* - *Isaiah 61:2, KJV*

Joseph understood the tension before Nicodemus explained it.

"So when He said, 'It is finished'..."

"Something was finished," Nicodemus said. "But not every word the prophets say He will yet do."

He looked toward the tomb entrance, where the last daylight touched stone.

"Joseph... He is not finished with Isaiah."

Then David.

> *"For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption."* - *Psalm 16:10, KJV*

The verse settled between them. Joseph looked at the body they were about to place in the grave.

"Then what happens?"

Nicodemus did not pretend.

"I do not know how."

"Nicodemus..."

"Ezekiel did not know how either."

Clean water returned first. A new heart. A new spirit. God's Spirit within. Then the next chapter: bones and breath and life.

> *"Son of man, can these bones live? ... O Lord GOD, thou knowest."* - *Ezekiel 37:3, KJV*

Nicodemus gave a small, broken laugh.

"That may be the answer Jesus was trying to teach me from the beginning."

Joseph said nothing.

"I kept asking how. Ezekiel says, Lord, You know."

Then Abraham came back: the promised son placed where obedience appeared to destroy the promise. Abraham had gone forward because the promise-giver could not fail.

"Joseph, I do not know what resurrection looks like. I do not know what God is about to do to this body."

He placed both hands on the sealed jar.

"But I know what Jesus said. I know what Isaiah says. I know what David says. I know what Ezekiel says."

Joseph looked at the balm.

"And therefore?"

For one instant Nicodemus remembered Jacob sending his sons toward a ruler whose identity the family did not yet understand: the best of the land, a little balm, and a prayer that God Almighty would give them mercy before the man. The balm had traveled with trust then too. Now Nicodemus knew the King before him, but still did not know the mechanism by which the promise would survive the grave. He broke the seal. The aroma rose before the balm touched skin.

Resin. Oil. Wax. Mountain aromatics. The concentrated smell of a place whose name had become attached to healing entered a garden tomb built for death. It displaced the cooler mineral smell of stone and mingled with myrrh, aloes, linen, earth, and the faint night air coming through the opening. Jeremiah came immediately.

> *"Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there?" - Jeremiah 8:22, KJV*

Nicodemus looked at the jar. Then at Jesus.

"There is balm."

Joseph watched him.

"And there is the Physician."

His voice caught.

"But this balm cannot do what He is going to do."

He dipped his fingers into the medicine and worked it gently into a wound. Not because resin could raise the dead. Not because oil could create a new heart. Not because wax could put the Spirit within a man. Nicodemus did not know what a resurrected body would be. He did not know whether the wounds he treated would remain, disappear, or become something neither man could imagine. His understanding was incomplete. But his belief had become active.

If God was going to return life to this Man, Nicodemus would not prepare the body as though decay had the final claim. The balm was the excellent lesser medicine, and Nicodemus finally knew its boundary. His faith was not in the jar. The jar was what his faith made him do with his hands. Joseph watched him spend what a physician would normally ration.

"You are going to use all of it?"

Nicodemus did not look up.

"You prepare a body for the grave because you believe it will remain there."

Joseph's eyes lifted. Nicodemus worked more balm into another wound.

"I don't."

They continued wrapping.

"I will not prepare Him as though death has won."

Joseph was quiet for a long moment. Then: "And if you are wrong?" Nicodemus looked at the face of the Man who once asked him how a master of Israel could not know these things. The old question returned.

How can these things be?

The first time he had asked it, he meant: explain the mechanism, and then perhaps I can believe. Now the tomb was cool around him, the balm warm beneath his fingers, the promise apparently sealed inside a dead body. Nicodemus no longer needed the answer first. His mouth trembled. His eyes filled.

"I believe."