

**Personal Eschatology:**  
***The End of My World as I Know It***

Jessica L. Morris

Thesis for Master of Arts in Theological Studies  
Moravian Theological Seminary  
Bethlehem, Pennsylvania

Rev. Dr. Frank Crouch, Advisor  
Barbara Martell, MEd, MA, MS, Reader

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## **Introduction**

As a confused, unhappy and desperate 29-year-old woman, I stood at the door of my first 12 Step recovery meeting for compulsive overeaters. I observed a room filled with women in relatively healthy-looking bodies, who appeared to be happy and self-confident. Completely unaware that the next hour spent with those women was going to be the first hour of an entirely new life for me, I entered the meeting guided by something other than my own will. For a long time, I referred to that something as “the gift of desperation.” Today, I am certain that what guided me into the room was a Power much greater than I.

“Jesus said to him, ‘You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven’” (Matthew 26:64).<sup>1</sup> For me, the arrival of Jesus on “the clouds of heaven” was in that first meeting, as he spoke to me through Lisa K. (who walked away from the group of people she was laughing with when I arrived, to ask if it was my first meeting and then spend time talking to me before the meeting began), Bonnie S. (who shared her personal story of recovery from compulsive overeating – humiliating warts and all – during the meeting), and Jeanne B. (who waved me down after the meeting to introduce herself, call me by name, look deep into my

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<sup>1</sup> NOTE: All Scripture will be cited from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

eyes and ask me to return the following week). It is my belief that I could see the arrival of Jesus in the presence of those women because he knew I could only see and receive him at that moment through others who had experienced the pain I was suffering. It was through the guidance of the women in that first meeting, and many others like them, that I would be able to recognize the “Power” within the solution of recovery of a 12 Step program – that solution being a need to die to everything I thought I knew (first about food, losing weight, exercising, etc., and then about life), in order to accept the complete will of a Higher Power (for me, that is Jesus) as the path that would bring me peace. Or, as John the Baptist so perfectly stated it: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

Through the combination of this twenty-year process of recovering from my addictions (food and alcohol) and intense study to obtain a master’s degree in theological studies, I have experienced a gradual spiritual awakening to belief in an eschatology (“...traditionally that area of theology concerned with the last things – the Second Coming, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, and attendant and subsequent events”<sup>2</sup>) that I can only define as personal. This personal eschatology is what I believe Jesus was referring to whenever he spoke about “final judgment,” “the resurrection of the dead,” or “the Second Coming;” but with the twist that Jesus was speaking directly to each and every one of us –

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<sup>2</sup> Dale C. Allison, Jr., “Eschatology of the NT.” *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 294.

telling us how he would return to each of us when the time was right for our personal transformation.

Knowing that Jesus often spoke metaphorically, this paper will present a viewpoint different from traditional forms of eschatology by offering a theological perspective that points to “personal eschatology,” or the dying of self as an eschatological necessity for entrance into the kingdom of God, which is available right here on earth. There are those in this world who have painted eschatology to be a dark, end-of-the-physical-world drama, while many others may need to know and experience their own “end-of the-world-as-they-know-it” through the transformation that occurs when one responds positively to the call from Jesus Christ, “Follow me.” I am making a case for personal eschatology because I believe I have been called to share my personal born-again experience, supported by academic research and the re-telling of the stories of Nicodemus in the Gospel of John, and the transformational life of the apostle, Paul.

From prophetic statements in the Hebrew Bible and the ambiguous statements of Jesus in the Gospels about his return, to references in New Testament letters of an imminent end time and the apocalyptic nature of Revelation, the topic of eschatology is covered thoroughly throughout the Bible. When it comes to eschatology in general, the many ways of interpreting the term and everything surrounding it make it an ambiguous idea:

The word derives from *eschatos*, the Greek word for “last.” Biblical writings often distinguish between the present age or eon, the period of history in which life is being lived, and the future, coming age, or period of transformed existence that God will bring at the end of history. The latter age or eon is sometimes also referred to as the age to come, the kingdom of God, the new world, or messianic age. The term “eschatology” is inherently ambiguous, since it may refer to teachings about events expected to take place during the last days (which belong to the present age) or about phenomena associated with the age to come.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, eschatology might point to a revelation for the future or the present, or maybe a revelation about the past, present and future all wrapped up into one neat and tidy theology. The ambiguity of it, as mentioned in the statement above, often causes confusion, misunderstanding and fear. But when we drill down to the meaning of the word, we find *eschatos* (last) and *ology* (the study of); so perhaps the ambiguity of it is intended. By itself, the word “last” has a plethora of meanings. “Last” what? Days? Things? Person? People? Moment in time? Hence, several theological minds have put an adjective in front of the word “eschatology” and created an entirely different way of looking at it. There are many academically recognized types of eschatology, but this paper will reference the two that have aided in my awakening to this personal eschatology, as well as in forming my now strongly held beliefs about it. These types are apocalyptic eschatology and realized eschatology.

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Allen Powell, ed., *The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 254.

Apocalyptic eschatology, while often thought of as an end-of-the-world event, points to a “revelation” of some sort.<sup>4</sup> The entertainment industry has made millions of dollars by taking one or two statements from the Bible and turning them into stories prophesying demonic children, possessed priests, and the complete destruction of the earth via natural disasters or man-inspired world wars. However, this apocalyptic or revelatory eschatology never really directs its reader to that end. “The word *apocalyptic* is often used to describe a catastrophic, chaotic event. The origin of the word is much simpler: It is a derivation of the Greek word *apokalypsis*, which means ‘revelation.’”<sup>5</sup> In fact, the Book of Revelation (considered apocalyptic literature) is not what most people interpret it to be after an initial reading. On the surface, it appears that complete destruction is foretold. However, the Book of Revelation actually describes “how God’s kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven.”<sup>6</sup> It is simply a revelatory story about “the overcoming of opposition between God and earth.”<sup>7</sup>

Realized eschatology, while sharing similar constructs to apocalyptic, describes a world in which “the kingdom of God” has already come. In his summary of realized eschatology, theologian Jurgen Moltmann clearly described

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<sup>4</sup> Scott M. Lewis, *What Are They Saying About New Testament Apocalyptic?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis, *What Are They Saying About New Testament Apocalyptic?*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Rowland, “The Eschatology of the New Testament Church.” *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry L. Walls, (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2008), 64.

<sup>7</sup> Rowland, “The Eschatology of the New Testament Church.” *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, 64.

a time that is *now*. The days of waiting for a sign, or a destructive end-of-the-world earthquake or tsunami to occur live only in the past:

When Jesus proclaims that the kingdom of God is ‘at hand’, he is not looking into the future in the temporal sense; he is looking into the heaven of the present. The kingdom does not ‘come’ out of the future into the present. It comes from heaven to earth, as the Lord’s Prayer tells us...The message is: the kingdom has arrived!<sup>8</sup>

Realized eschatology proposes that God’s kingdom has come with the person that was Jesus of Nazareth. While bits of this type of eschatology can be found in all four of the Canonical Gospels, it is most notably present in the Fourth. In Raymond Brown’s introductory commentary on John’s Gospel, he clearly states that “John is the best example in the NT of realized eschatology” and that “If one asks where is the judgment that marks God’s final intervention, John iii 19 answers, ‘Now the judgment is this: the light has come into the world.’”<sup>9</sup>

Basically, with Jesus, the final judgment has come, and the resurrection of the dead is at hand. This viewpoint of John’s is different than most of what is reported by the authors of the Synoptic Gospels, which incorporates a feeling of future expectation. And, while that view of realized eschatology might appear to be more comforting to the followers of Jesus, Brown’s commentary continues on to describe a challenge raised by this eschatological understanding of John’s:

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<sup>8</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 15.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Gospel According to John (I-XII)* (New York, NY: The Anchor Bible, 1966), CXVII.



But his followers were the heirs of an apocalyptic tradition which spoke of a coming in might and majesty, and so they could not believe that all had been realized in Jesus' ministry. To satisfy their expectations they projected a second, more glorious coming in the future – at first, in the near future; then, in the distant future.<sup>10</sup>

My presentation of personal eschatology suggests that the reason “his followers” were forced to create these changing expectations was because John’s presentation of realized eschatology was misleading. I intend to illustrate that when Jesus was making statements about these last things, he was not speaking of the past or the present or the future for every one of us at the same time. He was actually speaking about the time when he would come again, personally, to each of us. The confusion lies in the fact that for me, it could mean some day in the future, but for someone else, it could very well mean today!

Let us begin to unravel this idea by looking at the personal relationship between Jesus and the character of Nicodemus, whose developmental path (John 3:1-10, 7:45-52, 19:38-42) serves as the first defining example of personal eschatology.

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<sup>10</sup> Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I-XII)*, CXVII.

## **Chapter 1: The Developmental Journey of Nicodemus, a Pharisee<sup>11</sup>**

Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born again?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” (John 3:3-10)

This conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus regarding being born “from above” provides the foundation for this presentation of personal eschatology. During this essential teaching moment to a well-educated and religiously distinguished man, Jesus explains the necessity of a person’s need to die to everything he or she may already know “of the flesh” in order to embrace a new life by being born of “the Spirit.” The idea is difficult for Nicodemus to understand for two reasons. First, his stature within his religious and social community as “a Pharisee” or “leader of the Jews” (John 3:1) encourages him to

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<sup>11</sup> Some of the ideas represented in this chapter were originally proposed during previous study during the fall semester of 2017. Much of the final paper for that directed study on realized eschatology, entitled “Nicodemus: The Ambiguous and Identifiable Character in the Gospel of John,” has been edited and woven within the new, and more developed, concepts presented in this paper. Jessica L. Morris, “Nicodemus: The Ambiguous and Identifiable Character in the Gospel of John” (Final Paper, Directed Study, Moravian Theological Seminary, 2017).

believe that no one knows more than he does about how to be a good religious person. Second, what Nicodemus has already reasoned from the great amount of academic and religious learning he has experienced assures him that there is no one who is better equipped to interpret the scriptures than he.

Wherein we may read confusion in the seemingly ridiculous questions Nicodemus asks in response to this “born again” statement from Jesus, he may have been experiencing an unwillingness to let go of what he thought he already knew. Like many of us who meet Jesus for the first time, Nicodemus had a preconceived idea of what it meant to lead a life of religious obedience. Yet, instead of what he thought, Jesus told him that he was going to have to let go of all that intellectual knowledge in order to truly understand. The reality of that may have been too frightening for Nicodemus to embrace. How does one let go of everything he thinks he knows? What will become of the man who does set aside all that he has learned? As we will see throughout the journey of Nicodemus through John’s Gospel, the development of his character from one who knows, to one who is confused, to one who simply follows, illustrates the absolute demand to let go of the intellectual understanding of one’s religion in order to embrace him (Jesus) who is Christ, no matter what the cost to self:

Nicodemus was an intellectual. He, too, had a rigid philosophical and theological system worked out, and it was a good system. He had even included a belief in God. The intellectual structuring of his philosophical religious system excluded Jesus as the Son of God.

But what did Jesus tell this intellectual? He said something like this: “Nicodemus, I am sorry that I cannot explain it to you. You have seen something that troubles you. You have seen something that does not fit your system. You have seen me to be good, and you have heard me say that I am God, that I act with the power of God. This does not fit your system, but I cannot explain it to you because your assumptions do not allow for a starting point. Nicodemus, to you it is not logical. Nothing in your system permits it. I am sorry I cannot explain. You will just have to be born again.” (Jn. 3:1-5).

In other words, Nicodemus had to start without even being logical from his own point of view. He had to start without fitting what Jesus said into his system. He had to take a leap of faith into a new system.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to note here that the author of John’s Gospel specifically states that Nicodemus comes to Jesus when it is night, and that he believes Jesus is a teacher from God because of the signs he has done (John 3:2). While there are commentators who believe the night in this section symbolizes the fact that Nicodemus comes from darkness (the Jewish leaders who eventually entrap Jesus and call for his crucifixion), Craig Keener’s commentary on the subject seems more suitable to the character: “In the story world, fear accounts for Nicodemus coming by night, but John probably also mentions ‘night’ on a more symbolic level for his audience, bracketing the narrative with Nicodemus coming ‘by night’ (3:2) and true believers leaving darkness to come to Jesus’ light (3:21). In so doing, John foreshadows Nicodemus’s ultimate discipleship in 19:39-42.”<sup>13</sup> The

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<sup>12</sup> Billy Graham. *World Aflame* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1965), 58.

<sup>13</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 536.

night in this section of John 3 represents all those who come to Jesus in ignorance (the night/darkness). They cannot see the true light (Jesus) and are at first only attracted to him because of the miraculous signs he performs (see John 2, where, like Nicodemus, many believe in Jesus only because of the signs he performs). The conversation with Nicodemus, therefore, is representative of the conversation Jesus wants to have with every person who believes in him only because of those signs. We may show up to talk to him because of what we think we know from the signs he has shown, but Jesus is telling us (through this conversation with Nicodemus) that he wants us to follow him by letting go of what we think we know in order to be born again – of “the Spirit.” He wants us to move beyond the signs and certainties and become disciples simply because we believe in him.

What does this mean – this move beyond the darkness in which we live (whether it be the intellectual block for a man like Nicodemus, the disease of addiction for another, the sin of living in adultery for yet another, etc.)? This “born from above” language that is presented throughout Jesus’s discussion with Nicodemus (John 3:3-10) befuddles this teacher from Israel. He asks questions that sound like those of a non-educated person, or a child: “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” and “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” (John 3:4). The problem for Nicodemus in how he approaches Jesus is characteristic of the problem most people have in interpreting the scriptures – it is too rational of an approach, as explained in Raymond

Brown's commentary on John's Gospel: "However, the tactic of the Johannine discourse is always for the answer to transpose the topic to a higher level; the questioner is on the level of the sensible, but he must be raised to the level of the spiritual. An appreciation of the radical difference between the flesh and the Spirit is the true answer to Nicodemus."<sup>14</sup> Like Nicodemus, we all must rise above the rational (or sensible and worldly view) to the spiritual view that will open our eyes and our hearts to being born again of the Spirit.

Because Nicodemus's questions show that he is comprehending Jesus's statements in literal fashion, Jesus responds with an explanation of the difference between the flesh (literal birth) and the Spirit (metaphorical rebirth): "What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6), and "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). Still, Nicodemus doesn't understand (John 3:9). And maybe that is the point. As Jesus continues to speak, the character of Nicodemus fades away quietly and the reader is left to listen alone and unsure. "Interacting with Nicodemus' character brings the reader to a place of reflection on the complexities of following Jesus."<sup>15</sup> Perhaps this discussion and the confusion that

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<sup>14</sup> Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I-XII)*, 138.

<sup>15</sup> Susan E. Hylen, *Imperfect Believers: Ambiguous Characters in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2009), 38.

arises within the discussion are meant to illustrate the difficulty each person encounters when trying to follow Jesus.

It is not until four chapters later that the character of Nicodemus reappears. One might wonder if he is off somewhere, doing research, zealously trying to figure out what Jesus meant by everything he said. But, like the great academic minds of today, no amount of research and study would have been enough to increase Nicodemus's spiritual understanding of what Jesus was attempting to impart during their first conversation. One must be reborn of the Spirit (in other words, die to the current state of self), or apart from this world (and what one knows because of learning within this world), in order to receive, understand, and live within the kingdom of God. The removal of the material world, the emptying of self/ego, the surrender to the light which is Jesus through the acceptance of the Spirit is that rebirth – a drastic change.

What might that drastic change look like in a person? The change in Nicodemus begins before he can see it himself, and even before he meets Jesus. Others in the Sanhedrin may have had the desire to seek Jesus out in order to ask questions, but as far as we know, no one else did. Nicodemus followed through on the thought and made his way to Jesus in spite of the fear he may have had of being “found out” by his friends who detest Jesus. The nudging he felt to find out more about Jesus was stronger than the fear to hide away and sit in judgment with his fellow Pharisees. In that, the reader is welcomed more personally into the

story, as the representation Nicodemus carries becomes an invitation to anyone who ever feared what others would think of them. His actions show the reader that taking that first step out of the darkness is possible. Asking questions to investigate the light is the key to the door that opens up to rebirth, and it is available to anyone.

When Nicodemus appears in the story again at the end of chapter 7, his actions illustrate that while he was away, the change within him has begun to take hold and some of that fear that first had him hiding within the darkness has been transformed into courage to step out into the light. It is at this time that Nicodemus publicly defends the life of Jesus. We must not overlook the magnitude of that action (and how much of a change that action represents within a man like Nicodemus).

In the beginning of the chapter, many in the crowd of people and those referred to as “the Jews”<sup>16</sup> question Jesus’s intentions and his teaching (John 7:11-

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<sup>16</sup> Sadly, because of its repeated references to “the Jews,” the Gospel of John has been used as if it supports anti-Semitism and religious violence. The issues involved in this history and their relevance today lie beyond the scope of this thesis. My own views on John and anti-Semitism are concisely reflected in this statement by Paul Anderson:

“...while John played a role in anti-Semitism and religious violence, such influences represent the distortion of this thoroughly Jewish piece of writing, which actually provides ways forward for all seekers of truth and inclusivity if interpreted adequately. The Fourth Gospel represents an intra-Jewish perspective, standing against violence and force, forwarding a universalist appeal to all seekers of truth, while also documenting the dialectical engagement between revelation and religion.”

- Paul N. Anderson, “Anti-Semitism and Religious Violence as Flawed Interpretations of the Gospel of John,” in *John and Judaism: A Contested Relationship in Context*, eds. R. Alan Culpepper and Paul N. Anderson (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017) 1 and 3.



15). Skillfully, Jesus defends himself by referring directly to the teachings of the Jews: “Did not Moses give you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why are you looking for an opportunity to kill me?” (John 7:19) and “Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment” (John 7:24). The back and forth between Jesus, the crowd, and the Jews continues until the Pharisees step in and send temple police to arrest Jesus (John 7:32). When those police return without Jesus in custody, Nicodemus listens as his fellow Pharisees attempt to belittle them and the people in the crowd by spouting their authority and intelligence: “Then the Pharisees replied, ‘Surely you have not been deceived too, have you? Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, which does not know the law – they are accursed’” (John 7:47-49). At this point, Nicodemus could very easily retreat into the shadows once again, safely remaining a respectable member of the Sanhedrin. Instead, a courageous and well-prepared Nicodemus steps forward and speaks up in defense of Jesus: “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” (John 7:51). In this public declaration in favor of Jesus, Nicodemus quotes both Jesus and the law (John 7:19, 24). He may still be a Pharisee who is educated well in the law of the Jewish religion, but while he was away from the story Nicodemus transformed from confused and frightened Jewish leader to defender of this man who has claimed to be the “Messiah” and the “Son of God” (John 4:26, 5:18). This willingness to risk his own reputation for the sake

of a man he has only had one conversation with shows the beginning of surrender of self-knowledge. What I propose was really happening while Nicodemus was away from the story, was not a furious study of the Torah and other religious writings to which Nicodemus had access, but instead an embracing of his heart's feeling for Jesus. What was coming from within his own heart after meeting Jesus was taking precedence over the knowledge he had gained from years of religious education and service as a Pharisee.

At this point, the transformational process of Nicodemus illustrates that a personal eschatological experience does not negate all that an individual has studied, learned and believed prior to transformation. Instead, this personal eschatology transforms all aspects of the person into one who is now present for the experience of knowing and following Jesus. What he or she has already studied, learned and believed may still be of use in the experience of knowing and following Jesus. Therefore, only that which is no longer helpful is discarded. There are some scholars who declare complete and total change is the only way to become a true disciple of Jesus: "Acquiring the state of full, unambiguous discipleship means passing through the truly liminal state of birth, in which *all* connections with the past are severed."<sup>17</sup> However, in quoting the law of the Jews, Nicodemus is recognizing both the validity of the law and the person who is

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<sup>17</sup> Jouette M. Bassler, "Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108 (1989): 646.

Jesus. His actions illustrate the possibility of change without complete separation from the past. In fact, this scene alone speaks to the importance of remembering where we come from and how it has aided in shaping the spirituality of our lives. In this, the character of Nicodemus shows us that while drastic change is necessary, complete separation from the past is not. Accepting ambiguity on the path of rebirth actually opens the door for each individual's gradual, and also drastic, change.

The final piece of the change in Nicodemus is revealed in the burial scene in Chapter 19, where he assists Joseph of Arimathea in anointing the body of Jesus in preparation for its burial. "Nicodemus seems to act as assistant to Joseph – it is the latter who requests Jesus's body – but he nevertheless arrives armed with a huge bundle of spices, the scale of which befits the burial of a king."<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note here that even the disciples who have been following Jesus around throughout his ministry are not present for his burial. In fact, each of the Gospel accounts reports in one way or another that most of them abandoned Jesus at the first sign of trouble. Those who had appeared to be his most loyal friends disappeared from the scene and left their friend to be captured, tortured, judged unfairly, crucified, and now buried alone. Their absence illustrates beautifully the drastic change in the character of Nicodemus. In his development from a

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<sup>18</sup> David M. Allen, "Secret Disciples: Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea," in *Jesus Among Friends and Enemies*, eds. Chris Keith and Larry W. Hurtado (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 160.

secretive, yet interested Pharisee in chapter 3, to one of only two who show up to give the body of Jesus its proper burial in chapter 19, the character of Nicodemus demonstrates the enormity and difficulty that is involved in the type of change required to be born-again into the kingdom of heaven right here on earth through relationship with Jesus.

The absence of the disciples also speaks to the lack of perfection present in any of the followers of Jesus. The side-story of Nicodemus is here pushed to center stage. This man who came to Jesus in secret out of fear, has since defended him in public and is now showing up to ensure that the body of Jesus is properly prepared for a Jewish burial. Throughout his character's development, Nicodemus provides an entryway to identification for anyone (whether the reader of this story is a disciple, a half-hearted follower, a doubter, or a complete adversary). His behavior has not been perfect, and his discipleship has not been complete; but here he is present. No matter what he has said or done or thought in the past, he is now at the mercy of his belief in Jesus. Out of the dark and into the light, Nicodemus's behavior over a period of time illustrates the gradual process of dying to self and being born again from above.

Even though Nicodemus is introduced as a "Pharisee" and "leader of the Jews," his presence throughout the Gospel of John shows each and every reader that the invitation to follow Jesus is for all. As he questions Jesus, he is a representation of every person who yearns to know more about Jesus but doesn't

quite understand what Jesus is all about. Even in his apparent ignorance, his behavior supports asking questions; for when we do, we are let in on the secret – that through rebirth in embracing Jesus, we are given eternal life. The powerful message Jesus imparts to Nicodemus (John 3:3-21) is the message every person is welcome to receive: “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of *all* people” (John 1:3b-4, italics mine).

“It is no accident that this interview between the teacher of Israel and the Teacher come from God should be reported to us, despite its personal, almost secret nature, for if ever there were a message needed by all the children of men, it is this one. Spoken to one, it is meant for all.”<sup>19</sup> The fact that Nicodemus is an educated character and still doesn’t seem to understand Jesus during his first visit with him makes his representation of every one of us even better. It illustrates that it does not matter how much we think we know, or even how much we actually do know. When it comes to Jesus, we need to set that knowledge aside in order to listen and watch with an open mind and an open heart. We simply need to look to Jesus and to follow Jesus. “Israel’s ‘teacher’ does not understand his own subject, one might say, and, with characteristic Johannine irony, the narrative soon makes it evident who is teaching whom.”<sup>20</sup> Nicodemus shows us that

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<sup>19</sup> Everett Falconer Harrison, “The Son of God Among the Sons of Men,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 103 (1946): 55.

<sup>20</sup> Allen, “Secret Disciples: Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea,” in *Jesus Among Friends and Enemies*, 159.

anyone can be taught by Jesus, as long as they are willing to come to him.

Anyone can be changed by Jesus, as long as they are willing to ask questions, listen, and follow.

When this storyline begins, it is obvious that the character of Nicodemus represents the educated and the interested. It is also obvious that the consistent ambiguity surrounding which “side he is on” throughout the story is purposeful writing. Instead of displaying for the reader exactly what Nicodemus is thinking and feeling, the author of John expresses only a few emotions through the character: intrigue, confusion, and compassion. Nicodemus is intrigued, so he visits Jesus to find out more about him. He is confused by what Jesus says to him, so he expresses that. He is compassionate toward the person that is Jesus, so he defends him in life and then respects him in death. “It is not that they necessarily adopt a neutral position but rather that the Evangelists’ depiction may be insufficient for one to be confident either way, and so the reader is left to ponder further as to the precise nature of the relationship.”<sup>21</sup> Intrigued, confused and compassionate may not seem to say much about Nicodemus, and yet it speaks volumes as one begins to identify with the character by looking within oneself, which may have been the intent all along.

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<sup>21</sup>Allen, “Secret Disciples: Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea,” in *Jesus Among Friends and Enemies*, 149.

In this way, the story carefully weaves a path into the heart of those investigating the journey of Nicodemus. "...for meaning...is created anew as each reader becomes actively engaged with the text."<sup>22</sup> As we continue our search within the text to discover who Nicodemus really is and what he really feels, we uncover the truth spoken by and lived through Jesus. When we ask why Nicodemus would defend Jesus in public after having had such a weird and insulting conversation earlier in the story with Jesus, we learn more about the open-minded seeking and steadfast courage it takes to understand and follow Jesus. Understanding and following Jesus is filled with mystery and uncertainty as we attempt to navigate a world that is only familiar with immediate gratification and figuring it all out. "John's Nicodemus is – at best – only slowly brought over to Jesus's side (if at all); he struggles to understand what an appropriate response to Jesus might be. Such elusiveness, then, such ambiguity of relationships, resists the temptation to place Jesus's ministry in simplistic terms."<sup>23</sup> We find that in one scene we know Nicodemus as someone who does not understand what Jesus is teaching. Then, during his next appearances in the text, Nicodemus can be interpreted as a true believer or at least "acting as if" he is a believer. Together, these facts tell us that there is nothing simple about what is

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<sup>22</sup> Bassler, "Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel," 644.

<sup>23</sup> Allen, "Secret Disciples: Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea," in *Jesus Among Friends and Enemies*, 169.

going on. It also shows that although rebirth does mean drastic change, there is no perfection in following Jesus.

Nicodemus spends the entire Gospel story in transition from darkness to light. In so doing, he finds himself speaking out in defense of Jesus and risking his reputation and connection with those whom he has shared religious and communal life in order to give Jesus a proper burial.

If our conclusions are correct, one of these functions may very well be to show that the movements from darkness to light, from condemnation to life, or even from secrecy to openness, are neither necessarily easy nor automatic. They can be, as for Nicodemus, long and difficult movements of distancing and aligning. Thus, the Fourth Gospel, despite all its metaphors, imageries, and symbolism, shows how it is anchored in “real life,” speaking to implied readers who are also works in progress. Whether their faith needs to be strengthened or their witnessing activity revitalized, they can be encouraged by the process that led Nicodemus from night to life.<sup>24</sup>

None of this could have been easy for Nicodemus. In fact, in Jouette Bassler’s opinion, “Nicodemus moves through the narrative with one foot in each world, and in this Gospel that is just not good enough.”<sup>25</sup> But as a reader today, in a world where ambiguity can now be embraced as the beginning of the path to true understanding and acceptance of Jesus, this character of Nicodemus is an example for every person who wants to travel that path to accepting Jesus and His teachings as a way of life. Nicodemus moves us beyond Bassler’s opinion of

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<sup>24</sup> Nicolas Farelly, “An Unexpected Ally: Nicodemus’s Role Within the Plot of the Fourth Gospel,” *Trinity Journal* 34 (2013): 42-43.

<sup>25</sup> Bassler, “Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel,” 646.



“just not good enough” to “wow, even the educated guy doesn’t understand!” In his stumbling imperfections, Nicodemus gives us hope. Maybe like him, we too can find our way to understanding Jesus, defending Jesus, and respecting Jesus.

We too can find our way to coming out of the darkness, no matter what the cost to our lives as we know them, in order to follow Jesus to the death of self and embrace eternal life.

## **Chapter 2: The Conversion of Paul, from Persecutor to Preacher**

In the story of Nicodemus, we looked at the progressive transformation of a Pharisee who met and spoke with the man who was Jesus of Nazareth. Throughout their brief, yet important, relationship, Nicodemus changed his belief about who Jesus was. Whether he fully understood why he was changing his belief or not, by the time the man who was Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, Nicodemus had experienced enough of Jesus to turn from the fears with which so many people struggle, in order to behave in a way that illustrated his acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah. As previously stated, the born-again conversation that Jesus had with Nicodemus (John 3:1-16) provides the foundation for this presentation on personal eschatology. However, the story of Nicodemus is an example of personal eschatology for one who had actually met Jesus in his human form, spoken with him, and watched as he was persecuted and crucified right before his eyes. The personal eschatological experience that Nicodemus underwent occurred before the resurrection of Jesus. In fact, there is no evidence that Nicodemus ever encountered the risen Christ. The “dying of self” in order to experience the kingdom of God occurred for Nicodemus because of the *human* life of Jesus of Nazareth. So, what about those of us who are wandering around in this world today? Having never had the opportunity to meet the human Jesus, how are we to identify our own experiences with this idea of personal eschatology? How are we to recognize that the dying of self is an eschatological

necessity for entrance into the kingdom of God, which is available right here on earth?

The first recorded story of personal eschatology for one who had never met Jesus of Nazareth prior to his crucifixion will certainly assist our understanding of and identification with this presentation. As we turn to the life of a Pharisee named Saul, better known to today's Christian community (and hereafter referred to) as the Apostle Paul, we are introduced to another well-educated man, who had been thoroughly trained in Jewish ways and traditions. Born into Judaism, Paul became a Pharisee, and ultimately a persecutor of those involved with the early movement of Christianity. Paul never met Jesus in person, and there are no specific accounts that define exactly why his beliefs led him to persecuting those early Christians, other than his own words in a letter in which he described himself as "zealous for the traditions of my ancestors" (Galatians 1:14). Paul does not elaborate on what, exactly, that means or what traditions were involved. However, there are several references to his persecuting ways in more of his own writings, as well as the Acts of the Apostles (1 Corinthians 15:9, Galatians 1:13, Philippians 3:4-6, Acts 8:3, Acts 9:1-2, Acts 22:3-5, Acts 26:9-11).

It is obvious from his own statements that "Paul was not an ordinary Jew. He was a fanatic Pharisaic Jew in his zeal for the Torah and the traditions of the fathers. As to righteousness (right standing before God) under the law, he depicts

himself as blameless.”<sup>26</sup> Paul used the word “blameless” (Philippians 3:6) to describe how he thought of himself during the time in his life when he was persecuting Christians. How is it then, that today, Paul is perhaps the most well-known of all the Christian apostles?

Credited for writing at least twenty-five percent of the New Testament, Paul is often sought out by Christians to find the answer to the question of how to be an upstanding and worthy follower of Christ. To one who might only be familiar with Paul’s pre-conversion way of life (self-righteous persecutor), it would be baffling to try to comprehend why he is so often emulated and quoted by those following Christ today. On the other hand, to those who have heard Paul’s conversion story, it is easy to understand the attraction Christians have to his writings. Paul was just like those who walk the earth today – he had never met Jesus of Nazareth in person. Before his walk on the road to Damascus, Jesus was just someone about whom he had heard stories. Furthermore, before his conversion, Paul was a persecutor of the early Christians. Some may have considered him self-righteous, close-minded, and egotistic. Not only is Paul similar to those of us walking the earth today in that he never met the human Jesus, but also because of the fact that, at times, his letters reveal some of the

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<sup>26</sup> Johnny B. Awwad, “From Saul to Paul: The Conversion of Paul the Apostle.” *Theological Review* 32, no. 1 (2011), 6.

unappealing character traits with which so many of us struggle<sup>27</sup>. Therefore, Paul's conversion story is the first recorded account of the type of personal eschatology that can occur today.

As he set out on the road to Damascus to find more Christians to persecute, Paul was literally confronted by Jesus, the Christ he was so vehemently persecuting:

“Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.” (Acts 9:3-9)

Confronted may not be the most appropriate word to use while illustrating what happened to Paul on the road to Damascus. Completely immobilized might be more fitting! The appearance of Jesus physically blinded this persecutor of Christians. As he preached in life, so Jesus taught symbolically as the risen Savior. Instead of trying to explain things to Paul, Jesus simply appeared and

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<sup>27</sup> “...sin...produced in me all kinds of covetousness” (Romans 7:8); “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Romans 7:16); “...when I want to what is good, evil lies close at hand” (Romans 7:21); “For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (1 Corinthians 15:9); “...I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief...Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost” (1 Timothy 1:13-15)

demonstrated to Paul what he could not see as he went about persecuting Christians – which was everything.

After this encounter with Jesus, Paul's life took a turn that no one that knew him could have foreseen. He became the most accomplished of Christian church-planters, missionaries, and preachers. His letters to the churches he planted helped to rapidly spread the early Christian movement, and have continued to be read by millions upon millions of people during the last two thousand years. Because of his willingness to accept the transformation the risen Christ offered to him on the road to Damascus and throughout the days that followed, Paul went from persecuting Christians to preaching for Christ. His story dramatically illustrates a complete life turnaround. Paul's experience with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus was the end of his life as he knew it, or for that matter, as he ever thought his life would be.

Considering the fact that the Pharisees were one group of Jews who did believe in the resurrection of the dead,<sup>28</sup> Paul's encounter with a resurrected Messiah would not necessarily have been that big of a deal. Yet, as Paul referenced when speaking about himself in his pre-conversion days, the resurrection of the dead was reserved for those who were right with God or "blameless," which, in Paul's pre-conversion way of thinking, Jesus most

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<sup>28</sup> Acts 23:8

certainly was not. Having died in the most “cursed” (Galatians 3:13) way of crucifixion meant that it was unfathomable for Paul to believe that Jesus could experience resurrection.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, until Paul met up with Jesus in this miraculous moment on the road to Damascus, it would have been impossible for him to consider Jesus the Messiah. However, after the encounter, and what happened in the days that followed, Paul’s acceptance of Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah, the one whose coming was foretold was undeniable.

According to Acts, in the midst of Paul’s journey to continue persecuting Christians, which had most likely been going well for him up until that point, the risen Christ appeared to him, and told Paul that he was going to make him one who preached on what he had seen in Jesus. In so doing, Paul would become a messenger for Jesus in order to help others to “turn from darkness to light” and “from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:15-18). And then Jesus proceeded to blind Paul for three days (Acts 9:9). Literally blinded. Without sight. In other words, completely thrown off course, first spiritually by what Jesus said was going to happen (a complete change in belief, attitude, behavior), and then physically (unable to move forward for lack of sight). One need only imagine what it must have been like for Paul to sit in blindness for three days, paralyzed in fear and uncertainty, to understand how regaining his sight from the touch of a

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<sup>29</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, Luke Timothy, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 104.

Christian sent by Christ was the final nail in the coffin that held his previous way of life.

So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” All who heard him were amazed and said, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked his name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?” Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews, who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah. (Acts 9:17-22)

Not only was Paul’s sight restored, but it was restored by Ananias, a Christian who greeted Paul as “brother.” With this seemingly insignificant salutation, and the healing that followed it, Paul, who was once feared by Christians, was accepted immediately by one of them because of the direction given by Christ. The miracle of Ananias’s acceptance, compassion and love towards Paul cannot be overlooked by those of us who hear this story today. It was certainly not overlooked by Paul. For what he then did with his life speaks volumes to his complete faith in the risen Christ. “The direction of Paul’s life was literally turned around 180 degrees after he met the Lord on the road to



Damascus. He began to live a new way of life, which was a striking contrast to his past.”<sup>30</sup>

The contrast is obvious. Paul no longer lived to persecute Christians, but instead to carry the message of Christ in order to enlighten others to that message. His experience in meeting Jesus brought about a personal death (an end to his life as he had known it), followed immediately by a personal resurrection (a life born into the saving message of Jesus Christ). Paul, himself, even spoke to this complete dying to self that is necessary for all, and that he experienced personally, in a letter to the churches he founded in Galatia:

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:15-20)

Let us pause for a moment to look at Paul’s eschatological experience in relation to the earlier discussion of eschatology within this thesis. Realized

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<sup>30</sup> Sung-Chul Hong, “Paul’s Conversion,” in the *Korea Journal of Christian Studies*, Vol. 25 (2002), 240.

eschatology, as previously stated, proposes that God’s kingdom has come with the person that was Jesus of Nazareth – the kingdom of God is available *now*. In a stunning section of the Gospel of John, Jesus shares what I believe is the foundation of realized eschatology when he speaks of his own authority here on earth in relation to that of the “Father”:

Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished. Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes. The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son, so that all may honor the Father. Anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life. “Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.” (John 5:19-25)<sup>31</sup>

As we listen in on this message from Jesus in relation to our travels with Nicodemus and Paul, it is clear that those who were blessed to have met Jesus while he walked the earth, as well as those did not meet him, could all experience

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<sup>31</sup> Returning to the Gospel accounts where Jesus spoke of it, we are reminded that eschatology is the study of last things. As Jesus spoke about the end of things, or his return (aka: The Second Coming), his descriptions were, at times, prophetic and frightening (Matthew 24:29-31; Luke 21:25-28). At other times, his message was one of hope for the present day (Matthew 16:28; John 5:25). He also described what he referred to as “The Kingdom of God”, often hinting that it was actually happening at that moment, or available within the scope of the present day (Matthew 12:28; Mark 9:1; Luke 17:21).

a personal eschatology, that at first may have been unsettling or terrifying, but essentially became hopeful and ultimately transformational.<sup>32</sup>

Returning specifically to Paul's meeting with Ananias, we listen in as Ananias told Paul that he was "to be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 9:17). And as he said this, Paul's sight was restored, and he was baptized. He was re-"born of water and Spirit." As he moved from there to carry the message of the risen Christ to others, Paul left the life he had known behind and walked into the "Kingdom of God" as Jesus had described it: "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed...in fact, the kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:20-21).

At the same time, like Nicodemus, Paul's mind remained steeped in what he had learned about religion and Jewish tradition, but none of what was happening to him had to do with what he learned in life prior to his meeting with the risen Christ, or any good deeds he had done. He was immediately accepted by one whom he had been persecuting. He was blinded and given sight again at the direction of the One he persecuted. And, while we will review in more detail some of the letters Paul would write after this conversion in the next chapters,

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<sup>32</sup> Could Nicodemus have been one of those Jesus was referring to when he stated, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom" (Matthew 16:28)? Could Paul have been one of those Jesus was referring to when he said to Nicodemus, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (John 3:5)?

what we have already seen of his story is sufficient to state that his story is a most powerful example of dying to self in order to enter the kingdom of God, which was available to Paul all along, right here on earth.

### **Chapter 3: Personal Death and Resurrection Experienced**

#### **Part I:**

In John 11 is the story of a man named Lazarus. This story illustrates the physical death of Lazarus, in the absence of his friend, Jesus; and the resulting miraculous resurrection of Lazarus's body four days after his death, in the presence of Jesus (John 11:1-44). It is interesting to note that this particular story only appears in John's Gospel. If, as was previously mentioned in the introduction of this presentation, realized eschatology proposes that God's kingdom has come with the person that was Jesus of Nazareth, then the appearance of this literal physical death and resurrection would naturally emerge in the Gospel account that most supports that theology.

The story takes place not long before Jesus's own death and resurrection, and often serves as a lead in for it, as has been noted by many who study the Bible. In fact, in John's Gospel, it is because of this specific miracle that those within the Sanhedrin gather to discuss the threat of Jesus and how they will plan to kill him.<sup>33</sup> While not arguing the merit to that theory, there is also another important symbolic connection between John's story of Lazarus and the idea of personal eschatology.

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<sup>33</sup> Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I-XII)*, 442.

Let us first look at the chain of events within John, chapter 11. In the simplest of terms: Lazarus was a friend and follower of Jesus. When Lazarus became ill, messages were sent to Jesus by family and friends, asking him to come and help. Lazarus died. Jesus showed up (too late, it seemed), wept, and then raised Lazarus from his tomb by calling him to come out. When Lazarus appeared from the tomb, still wrapped in the cloths of burial, Jesus looked to those who loved Lazarus and said, “Unbind him, and let him go” (v.44).

Now, let us look at the chain of events that most people suffering from addiction experience when they hit their personal bottom and find recovery. The addict suffers from all the consequences of their particular addiction – physical and mental illness, spiritual isolation, and for some, running from debt, relationship problems, and legal issues. The addict’s relationship with Jesus (or a god of any sort) usually only shows up during times of crisis, in the form of “foxhole” prayers. More often than not, the addict is surrounded by people who love them and have realized that all they can do to help is to pray (send messages to God) – so they do. Still, the addict continues to self-destruct, physically, mentally and spiritually. Those who love them believe the addict is a lost cause. They often worry that the next phone call received will be the one that informs them the addict is dead (it’s too late for any type of intercession). Meanwhile, for some addicts, a bottom is reached when the gift of absolute desperation (death of everything they thought they knew) sets in and they are able to receive the call to

“come out” from the tomb of their disease-imposed self-destruction. When the addict responds positively to this call and follows the simple instruction that has often already been given to them by a counselor, doctor, friend, rehabilitation facility or family member, and attends a meeting with other recovering addicts, their “Higher Power” looks to the people at that meeting and says, “unbind him, and let him go.”

Like Nicodemus, who was companioned by Joseph of Arimathea during his transformation, and Paul, who became able to see because of the intercession of Ananias, Lazarus and the analogous addict do not need to take their transformational steps alone. In fact, Jesus’s comments immediately after bringing Lazarus back to life encourage the community of people around him (and the addict) to assist in removing the binds that still hold him to his death (or addiction).

When displayed in such a way, the similarities between the raising of Lazarus and the awakening (re-birth) of a recovering addict become clear. Therefore, the story serves as a perfect transition to the third example within this presentation of personal eschatology.

## Part II:

For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do

what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:14-25)

In the passage above, the Apostle Paul writes about his own inner conflict and the nature of sin in humanity. If you have ever heard a recovering addict share their story with other recovering addicts, you have heard an eerily similar testimony to that of Paul's. The knowledge the addict may have regarding addiction (or what Paul knew of the law), combined with the harrowing consequences previously experienced by the addict do not serve to stop the addict from returning to the drug, the alcohol, the donut, or whatever other addictive substance or behavior imprisons them. The disease of addiction brings about a weakness that will not allow change in behaviors, just as Paul recognized he was weakened in his humanity.<sup>34</sup>

Because this paper is presenting a *personal* eschatology for modern society, it is imperative that I share my personal journey through the perils of

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<sup>34</sup> For further discussion on 1 Corinthians 15:10, see the Conclusion of this presentation.



living in active addiction, and then finding a new way of living (re-birth) within the rooms of 12 Step recovery.

Most of my childhood and young adult life was spent eating, fantasizing about eating, wishing I was thin, fantasizing about the day when I would be thin, dieting so I could be thin, exercising to extremes, starving myself and taking laxatives so I could eat whatever I wanted and still be thin; and praying that God would make me thin because I could not stop eating. Logically, living at a healthy weight is rather simple for most people: eat a proper diet and stay fit with regular physical exercise. However, for the person living with the disease of food addiction (compulsive overeating, bulimia, anorexia, binge-eating disorder, etc.), there is nothing logical about how they live. For me, the suffering lasted until I reached a point of desperation in which I became willing to lay down every belief I ever had about food, dieting, exercising, losing weight, counting calories and fat grams, etc., and picked up the 12 Steps.<sup>35</sup>

That *gift* of desperation settled in for me in the cookie aisle of the local Weis supermarket. As I stood there, attempting to choose the best package of cookies to begin my binge later that night, a wave of clarity nearly knocked me off my feet. I suddenly realized that there was nothing in that store that was going to fill the emptiness inside of me. Somewhere deep within the core of my being, I

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<sup>35</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: NY, Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2001), 56-60.

had always known this fact, but at that moment, it was truly a revelation.

Unfortunately, that revelation was quickly followed by a much darker and absolutely hopeless thought – I could not leave the store without buying something, anything, to get me through the night. I truly did not want anything in that store, but I also knew without a shadow of a doubt that I could not leave without something. The food – which in the past had been my comfort, my celebration, my best friend and my lover – had turned on me. This was a revelatory hopelessness that lasted nearly a year.

Long before that moment, everyone who knew me had known that the food had turned on me. It was not difficult to recognize, since I was 5’4” and weighed nearly 300 pounds. I had several health issues caused by my obesity, had no real friends due to my negative outlook on life, and was certain God hated me and was punishing me with this disgusting body and lonely existence. Throughout my life, I had tried just about every way under the sun to lose weight and keep it off. Commercial weight loss programs, diets from magazines, playing sports and exercising compulsively, creating my own diets, trying to starve myself or make myself throw up, going to therapy to find out what was eating me in order to stop eating – you name it, I tried it.

Five years prior to that revelatory moment in Weis, I did find the largest amount of weight-loss success I had ever experienced. Through a commercial weight-loss program I entered after graduating from college, I successfully

obtained a muscularly-lean 135-pound body; becoming such a positive example of that program, that I became employed by the weight-loss company as a lecturer. What those customers I was lecturing to did not know is that after I stood in front of them in my lean body, describing how best to lose the weight they longed to lose, I went home and did hours of aerobic exercise so that I could eat an entire pizza without gaining weight. I was thin and wanted to stay thin, but I could not stop doing the one thing that I knew would take that away from me – eating compulsively. “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Romans 7:15). I knew that over-exercising and binge-eating was not healthy, but I could not stop. I knew that a healthy portion of cookies was two or three; but once I ate one cookie, I could not stop until the entire package was gone. Nothing I *knew* ever stopped me from eating compulsively.

All the knowledge I learned at that weight-loss company did nothing to stop me from gaining back the weight I had lost there, plus almost 100 pounds more beyond that. Like Nicodemus, who was a well-educated Pharisee, I could not understand that what I needed to know was nothing I could find in books or in counting calories. What needed to be understood spiritually in order for me to find peace was a very simple saying, often heard in the rooms of 12 Step recovery: “Self-knowledge availed us nothing.”<sup>36</sup> Just like it did not matter what Nicodemus

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<sup>36</sup> This saying originated from the quote: “But the actual or potential alcoholic, with hardly an exception, will be absolutely unable to stop drinking on the basis of self-knowledge.” *Alcoholics*

knew about religion, it did not matter what I knew about weight-loss. In fact, that knowledge was a detriment to both Nicodemus and me, blocking us from opening our minds to something beyond what we could understand intellectually. The answers we were searching for in books and papers and lectures were not there to find. The only Answer we would ever really need was standing right in front of us.

For Nicodemus, the Answer came in the form of a man named Jesus. For me, the Answer came through the countless members of 12 Step recovery I have met throughout the last twenty years of my life.

When Jesus described the new birth to intellectual, dignified Nicodemus, He said: “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit” (Jn. 3:8). Jesus said it was like the movement of the wind, which sometimes is imperceptible as a zephyr and at other times as revolutionary as a cyclone. Conversion is like that, too – sometimes quiet and tender, sometimes uprooting and rearranging the life under great emotional manifestation.<sup>37</sup>

The transformation of Nicodemus began in the quiet, dark of the night. After speaking with Jesus, he disappeared into the background until publicly defending Jesus to those he once studied and prayed with. His conversion gradually became one of “uprooting” and “rearranging the life” as described above.

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*Anonymous*, 39. NOTE: In the adaptation of the 12 Steps for food addicts, the word “alcohol” is changed to “food”.

<sup>37</sup> Graham. *World Aflame*, 155.

In contrast, Paul's conversion was one that uprooted him from the life he knew immediately. No conversations were had. There was no thoughtful contemplation or time for prayerful consideration. Paul's life was rearranged "under great emotional manifestation." Everything he thought he knew about God was turned upside down. What that meant for his status within his community of fellow Pharisees did not matter. What it meant for the future of Christianity and for countless followers of Jesus was everything. Turning away from the life he so "zealously" lived and following the call of Christ to carry his message instead is Paul's legacy. Where once he thought what he had been taught was the only way to be a righteous Jewish man of God, he was now ministering to those who did not even know Judaism, its history or traditions.

When I entered the rooms of 12 Step recovery, not only did I need to set aside everything I had ever learned about food and dieting (the self-knowledge stuff), but I also learned that I needed to surrender my life to a "Higher Power" as well. "Lack of power, that was our dilemma. We had to find a power by which we could live, and it had to be a *Power greater than ourselves*."<sup>38</sup> This is when I knew I was in trouble.

As previously mentioned, I was convinced that God hated me. In my mind, there was no way God was going to help me with my food problems or

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<sup>38</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 45.

with my life. The religion I had learned as a child – that of a vengeful and punishing God – had served only to keep me running away from God, and blaming God for the life I was living. Like Paul, who thought his way to God was the only way, I could not comprehend of any other version of God. Thankfully, the woman who became my first sponsor through the 12 Steps had experienced a similar religious upbringing as mine. When I shared my fear with her – that God was not going to help me with all this – she responded with compassion and the exact suggestion that kept me from running away from the program. She told me that my Higher Power did not need to be the God of my childhood. In fact, she said, my Higher Power could be whatever I wanted it to be, as long as it was something greater than myself! Seeing the confusion on my face, she went on to tell me that some people in the program consider the 12 Steps to be their Higher Power. Others believe that the fellowship within the 12 Step program is their Higher Power. And some even come to believe again in what they were taught as a child, but from a different perspective.

Fearing I might be struck by lightning if I even considered any of this, I told her I did not think I could embrace this idea. She then suggested to me that this would be a great time to practice having an open mind. She asked me if I would be willing to rely on her Higher Power until I could come up with one on my own. She then told me that her Higher Power was whoever happened to answer the phone when she reached out with a food issue; or whoever shared in a

meeting the exact words she needed to hear; or the person who hugged her after she revealed a fear she had about attending a dinner function for work. Basically, she said, her Higher Power was revealed to her through the other people within the program who showed her compassion and acceptance, and shared their wisdom and experience with her (Nicodemus with Joseph of Arimathea; Paul with Ananias; Lazarus with those who Jesus instructed to “unbind him”). As I write these words now, I sit in amazement that the me of twenty years ago actually accepted that idea. And I am so grateful that I did! “There is nothing to lose in seeking the God of my understanding except my false pride, my food obsession, my fat and all the life-destroying illusions that this illness breeds.”<sup>39</sup>

That was where my road to Damascus truly started. Not an “uprooting” like Paul, but a conversion, nonetheless. Slowly, over days, weeks, months and years of following the direction of those who had gone before me, I found my way to falling to my knees and offering my blindness to Jesus. Jesus, the only part of the Trinity with which I could identify as a child because of his suffering, led me back to the faith of my upbringing as He revealed himself to me through all those who had gone before me in the 12 Step meetings I attended. As all those people unbind me with their acceptance and unconditional love, I came to know Jesus beyond His suffering, and I became a disciple among disciples. I sold

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<sup>39</sup> *For Today*, (Rio Rancho, NM: Overeaters Anonymous, Inc., 1982), 32.

everything I once thought I could not live without – the grand ideas I had about food, dieting, and exercise; the resentments I had towards God for having me be born into a family of dysfunction; the unwillingness to see my part in any of the problems of my life – and I started following Jesus.

My experience with personal eschatology was gradual. I am not even sure of the exact moment when I truly died to the me that walked into that first meeting; but I am certain today that she is dead. The memory of her still lives, and the disease that propelled her to remain sick still lives, but the way she looked at life and the way she lived life no longer exists.

While my process of dying to myself was not a white-light experience, but instead took many days of stubborn surrender to settle in to my heart, I was much like Paul in the sense that it was not an obvious next step for me. Those self-centered, self-absorbed and self-righteous ways of thinking were *my* law. I had adhered to them “flawlessly” for 29 years and they had served me well (or so I thought). What I did not know was that the law I lived by was keeping me from a personal relationship with God and with others. Sure, I prayed on occasion, but I did not have a personal relationship with God. Yes, I said that I believed in the Ten Commandments and the golden rule of treating others as I wanted them to treat me; yet, by the time I arrived at my first 12 Step meeting, I had no friends to call my own. The consequences of my law were spiritual bankruptcy and loneliness, and I remained imprisoned to my disease of compulsive overeating.



The first step for an addict toward a personal eschatological experience, as outlined in the “Introduction” of this paper, is walking into a 12 Step meeting. There, the addict finds others who understand, like no one else can, the pain, degradation, shame and hopelessness that live in the newcomer’s soul. The newcomer hears others discussing openly the behaviors and attitudes that the active addict works tirelessly to keep covered up. As the newcomer comes back to meetings and begins following direction, those other members represent hope. Together, they exhibit a strength the newcomer never believed was possible. Together, they are moving beyond those unhealthy behaviors and attitudes and recovering (physically, emotionally and spiritually) from the addiction that once imprisoned them, and for some, brought them inches from death.

Within a statement often read at the beginning of one 12 Step program is the following declaration: “The amazing secret to the success of this program is just that: weakness. It is weakness, not strength, that binds us to each other and to a Higher Power and somehow gives us the ability to do what we cannot do alone.”<sup>40</sup> I have heard that statement read many times, but what has gradually dawned on me as I have shared my story here, is the similarity of the message in Paul’s own words to the church he planted in Corinth with the experience I have gained through 12 Step recovery:

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<sup>40</sup> “Our Invitation to You”, (Rio Rancho, NM: Overeaters Anonymous®, Inc. 1980, 1995, 1997, 2003, Rev. August 2019).

Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

It is a blessing, not a curse, to be an addict (the thorn in my side). For in that addiction, my weakness is made clear. When I admit that weakness and ask for help, the bond created with others within the 12 Step program becomes my strength and allows me to experience a new life. Furthermore, the recognition of my weakness in addiction draws me even closer to the suffering of Jesus. As so aptly stated in Krister Stendahl’s ground-breaking article about the Apostle Paul: “His weakness became for him an important facet in his identification with the work of Christ, who had been ‘crucified in weakness’ (2 Cor. 13:4; cf. also 4:10 and Col. 1:24).”<sup>41</sup>

Stendahl’s article presents an argument regarding Paul’s conversion that, at the time, was much different than what most scholars and Christians had come to believe was true about Paul. Stendahl proposes that Paul’s conversion was not in response to an introspective look into his own conscience, but instead “...a call to become the Apostle to and of the Gentiles. This was the task for which he – in

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<sup>41</sup> Krister Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West.” *Harvard Theological Review* 56, no. 3 (1963): 211.

the manner of the prophets of old – had been earmarked by God from his mother’s womb (Gal. 1:15, cf. Acts 9:15). There is not – as we usually think – first a conversion, and then a call to apostleship; there is only the call to work among the Gentiles.”<sup>42</sup> Paul did not fall to his knees on Damascus road and then become one of the greatest church planters ever known because he had a guilty conscience. He did so because he encountered the living Christ. I did not surrender to the 12 Steps of recovery and become healed because I had a guilty conscience. I did so because I encountered the living Christ in the women who were at that first meeting I attended.

When writing to the church he planted in Philippi, Paul does not speak of his former life with regret. In fact, as was previously mentioned within this presentation, Paul speaks highly of himself regarding his life as a Pharisee: “If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Philippians 3:4-6). But then, he goes on to state that because of his encounter with Christ, and now in knowing Christ, he has moved on from that former life, into a desire to know the righteousness that comes from God:

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<sup>42</sup> Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” 204.

I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:8-11)

Instead of regretting his life prior to his conversion, Paul sees it as “rubbish” to be lost so that he may now gain Christ. Similarly, one of “The Promises” often read at the end of many 12 Step meetings states: “We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it.”<sup>43</sup> Through remembering and sharing my experiences of living in active addiction, I am able to see clearly the “rubbish” my life was. I have chosen to lose that way of living in order to know the “power of his resurrection” through communion with other 12 Step members. My personal eschatological experience has evolved through a gradual resurrection into a life for Christ ever since I walked into that first meeting on August 19, 1999. For that was the day I truly died to my self.

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<sup>43</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York, NY: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1976), 83.

## **Conclusion**

In one of his letters to the church in Corinth, Paul preaches on the importance of reconciling ourselves as “apostles” with all others. With clarity, he describes the rebirth one experiences in Christ:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled with God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:17-21)

So it is with the addict in recovery. Profoundly stated by Jesus himself, “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). Recovery phrases that have become a part of my soul over the last twenty years confirm this idea: “Of myself, I am nothing.” “You can’t keep it unless you give it away.” “Trust God. Clean House. Help Others.” “Thy will, not mine, be done.” By myself in my addiction, I fell flat on my face. I stayed alone. I was not really living. I was really dying. But, when I died to my addictive behaviors, thoughts, and attitudes, the opportunity to bear much fruit was given to me.

Over the last twenty years of my recovery program, I have walked with many other members through the 12 Steps, provided service to my local, regional,

and national service bodies, and attended two to three meetings per week (if not more) to share my experience, strength, and hope with newcomers and returning members. I have shared my story of recovery at conventions and workshops for others in 12 Step programs, as well as in classrooms on college and high school campuses, for those learning about addiction and the process of recovering from addiction. I have written articles for my local and national recovery newsletters, and have volunteered my writing and editing services to the newsletter of *Easy Does It, Inc.* (a halfway house for recovering addicts in Leesport, Pa.). Personally speaking, I have shed over 120 pounds and kept it off by way of a healthy food plan and an active lifestyle. I have been able to work through the horrors of childhood abuse and forgive those perpetrators who I once swore I would never forgive. In my relationships today, I pray to put the other first, so that I can best serve God. I ask for help where I once suffered in ignorance. I offer help where I once thought only of myself. I have studied the 12 Steps and worked hard to make them a way of living. Through doing so, I have been blessed with peace in my heart. And, that peace I know, is not because of any of these things I have done... “...though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me...” (1 Corinthians 15:10).

The beauty of this thing I am calling personal eschatology is just that – it is personal. For Nicodemus, it was a curious step out of the dark to gradually discover what the light was all about. For the Apostle Paul, it was a blinding

conversion experience that turned his entire world upside-down in a moment's time. For me, it has been a slow, and sometimes painstaking, surrendering process that I hope will continue throughout the remainder of my days. The common denominator for all of us is Jesus. It was Jesus who took time to sit with Nicodemus and answer his questions (albeit allegorically). It was Jesus who showed mercy to Paul, even as he traveled to persecute Jesus's followers. And, it was Jesus who came to me through Lisa and Bonnie and Jeanne at that first 12 Step meeting, offering me acceptance, compassion, and love. Each of our experiences of personal eschatology are unique. Yet, each holds the foundation of a death to life as we once knew it, and a resurrection into a new life in following Jesus.

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