

THE JESUS I WANT TO KNOW:
THE WISE TEACHER
John 3-1-10; 16

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Have you heard the story of a pilot, business executive, Boy Scout, and pastor flying together in a private plane? The plane developed engine trouble. In a matter of minutes the pilot announced to the passengers that the plane was going down. To make matters worse there were only three parachutes available. "I have a wife and children at home depending on me," said the pilot as he took one of the parachutes and jumped. The business executive spoke up and said "Some people think I am one of the smartest men in the world. If I were to die, the world would suffer a great loss." With that he grabbed for a parachute and jumped. The pastor turned to the Boy Scout and said, "Son, you are young and I am old. I've lived my life and you are just beginning yours. Take the remaining parachute and I'll ride this thing out." That's when the Boy Scout said "Relax, Rev. The smartest man in all the world just took my back pack thinking it was a parachute."

One of the smartest men in Jerusalem came to visit Jesus on a moonlit night. His name was Nicodemus. He had power, position, prestige, wealth. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of Jerusalem. He was a Pharisee, a strict observer of religious rules. He was well educated, self-assured, confident, intelligent, like many of you. That night the wise teacher from Nazareth shared some things with a wise man from Jerusalem that you and I need to know.

GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON.

John 3:16. Karl Barth called it the Gospel in miniature. Religious football fans make posters about it for all the world to see. The love of God is the most revolutionary religious idea to ever dawn upon the mind of humanity. It gives dignity to every person. It gives meaning to every obscure life. It is hope for all the world.

Maybe it's more than our small minds can comprehend, understanding that *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son*. Fred Lehman wrote 50 years ago:

Could we with ink, the ocean fill
and were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill
and every man a scribe by trade.
To write the love of God above
would drain the ocean dry,
nor could the scroll contain the whole
though stretched from sky to sky.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.

Henri Nouwen put it this way: “We are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children, or friends loved or wounded us. That is the truth of our lives. *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.*” Nicodemus needed to understand that and know that on that particular night when he came to visit with this wise Rabbi, the one we know as Jesus the Christ.

WE NEED TO BE BORN FROM ABOVE.

There was something else that Nicodemus needed to know. He needed to know that he could be born again. Look at Verse 3—*I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.* The word can be *again*, it can be *above* or it can be *from the beginning*. All are proper translations of that particular phrase in Greek. Nicodemus asks, “What’s going on here? How can this be? You are talking about birth, I’m a grown man. How on earth can I go back and be born again? How can a man be born when he is old?”

I can think of no other religious phrase more used and abused in our day than the phrase ‘born again.’ Since the days of Jimmy Carter, it’s been political football. After the last election, Garrison Keillor announced himself on Public Radio to be the self-appointed chairman of a constitutional amendment to take away the right to vote from Born Again Christians since their citizenship is in heaven, not America.

At the same time, political strategist James Carville suggested the whole Democratic Party consider being Born Again. Religious writers try to distinguish between born again believers and non-born again believers even though they cannot find much difference in moral behavior between the two. In free market America you can buy born again T-shirts, join a born again dating service, listen to a born again radio station, or take born again vitamins. Take your pick. Born again is everywhere in our lives.

Meanwhile, Jesus says birth and re-birth is absolutely essential. There is a physical birth and there is a spiritual birth. Unless we are born spiritually we cannot know the spiritual life. And Nicodemus, as smart as he was, as educated as he was, as religious as he was, had tremendous trouble getting this idea into his mind. “How can these things be?” he asked in this conversation with Jesus.

There are a couple of things about new birth that you and I ought to know. The first is that New Birth is something that happens to us.

The newest member of our extended family is a great-niece named Emily Anita Mahaney. Her mother went to her doctor for a check-up the other day and lo and behold Emily was born right there in the doctor’s examination room. She didn’t wait to get to the hospital. She was born immediately. Birth is something that happens to us.

It took a long time for me to understand that. I have read this third chapter of

John since I was a kid and I always read it with the **MUST** emphasized. “You **MUST** be born again” as if it was something we needed to accomplish. So I’d turn over a new leaf, set a new resolution, try to become a better person. I can no more engineer my spiritual birth than I can orchestrate my physical birth. Birth is something that happens to us.

Paul was on his way to Damascus to kill Christians when heaven came down and glory filled his soul. It took him two years to figure out what had happened. John Wesley was unwillingly attending a Bible study on Aldersgate Street when he felt his heart strangely warmed. Nicodemus had no dramatic experience at all, but when it can time to put in a good word for Jesus in the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus took a stand. Birth is something that happens to us. It’s something that we receive. It’s an act of God made present to us in the Spirit. The best we can do is open our arms and hearts and eyes and receive the gift of God.

New Birth is new life that awaits us. Twins, a boy and a girl, were waiting in their mother’s womb for the time of their birth. The sister says to her brother, “I believe there is life after birth.” Brother says, “No, no, this is all there is. We have nothing to do but to cling to the cord that feeds us.”

Then Sister says, “There must be something more, a place of light, freedom to move and explore. And what’s more, I think there is a mother.” The Brother exclaims, “A mother! What are you talking about? I’ve never seen a mother and neither have you. We best be satisfied with what we’ve got.”

So Nicodemus comes to Jesus to get a few things nailed down. I’ve had a few questions about life. I’ve wondered about this; I’ve wondered about suffering; I’ve wondered about keeping the rules and I’ve wondered about a few things in my religious life. He raises these questions with Jesus and Jesus immediately just blows his mind. He says you’ve got it all wrong my friend. This all has to do with birth. I’ve got to tell you about some unexplored territory where spiritual eyes are opened to new sights and sounds, where hearts are assured that sins are forgiven, where the Spirit is present and the kingdom is revealed and a whole new life can unfold for you. Wouldn’t you like to be born again?

THE SPIRIT IS LIKE THE WIND.

There is a third thing that Jesus said to Nicodemus that night. The third thing is, Nicodemus, you need to pay attention to the wind, the Spirit. The Spirit is like the wind. It blows wherever it pleases.

Remember Bob Dylan’s song Blowin’ in the Wind?

How many roads must a man walk down
Before you can call him a man?
How many times must cannonballs fly
Before they’re forever banned?
The answer my friend is blowin’ in the wind,

the answer is blowin' in the wind.

How many times must a man look up
Before he can see the sky?
How many ears must one man have
Before he can hear people cry?
The answer my friend is blowin' in the wind,
the answer is blowin' in the wind.

For Christians that word *wind* has special significance. The word for wind and spirit are the same in the Greek language. And so Jesus plays between those two understandings to try to illustrate a spiritual truth to Nicodemus who is trying his best to understand things from a spiritual point of view. Verse 8 — *The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.*

I have lived my life by goals and dreams. I have managed the churches I've served by long-range plans and carefully defined strategies. Often I felt like I was rowing a boat across the ocean single-handed. Sometimes I even stopped and drifted on a raft, hanging on and hoping. I've discovered in recent years that the Church is neither a raft nor a rowboat. The Church is a sailboat. The way for a sailboat to move is to discover where the wind of the Spirit is blowing and to hoist the sails accordingly. I love people who come to talk to me about the direction of the church. If you've got that figured out, you let me know. But I basically say to people "Why don't you get down on your knees with me and let's figure out together what the Spirit is trying to say so we'll know which way to go?" It's not a well-oiled machine that becomes an instrument of God in our day. It's those who hoist the sail to the wind of the Spirit and dare to follow where He leads. The wind, Nicodemus, you better pay attention to the wind.

ETERNAL LIFE IS A GIFT OF GOD.

And one more thing, Nicodemus. Since you came at night and asked the question and told me I was a great teacher, let me tell you one more thing. **Eternal life is a gift of God.** *Whoever believes shall not perish but shall have everlasting life.*

Did you hear the story about the three men who died at the same time and found themselves together at the Pearly Gates? "What have you done to deserve heaven?" asked St. Peter. "I've been a police officer all my life," said the first man in line. "I've fought crime all my life." "Enter into your reward," said St. Peter.

The second in line said "I am a philanthropist; I have given millions of dollars to charitable causes." "Come right in," said St. Peter.

The third man in line said, "I am the director in an HMO organization. I've helped save millions of dollars on health care and insurance companies. I've helped cut down on waste and fraud." "Come right in," said St. Peter, "but you can only stay three days."

The problem with that story is that none of us earn eternal life on our own merit, not the police officer, not the philanthropist, or the HMO executive. We have eternal life as a gift. It is God's gift to us.

Jesus prayed it in John 17:3 *This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*

The second verse I learned after John 3:16 is Romans 6:23 *The wages of sin are death but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.* It's a gift my friends, pure, gift.

When we come to feel the limitations of 24 hours, when we feel the crunch of seven days a week, and wonder why there are only twelve months in a year, when we ponder in the night why life is so short, we are pushing into the territory of eternity. It is precisely because of eternity outside time that everything inside time becomes valuable.

Robert Louis Stevenson put it this way:

The stars shine over the mountains,
The stars shine over the sea,
The stars look up to the mighty God,
The stars look down on me.

The stars shall last for a million years,
A million years and a day;
But God and I will live and love
When the stars have passed away.

The wind, Nicodemus, the Spirit is blowin' in the wind. The Spirit brings for you and me the possibility of being born from above. It brings to us the opportunity for spiritual eyes and spiritual hearts, the privilege to see things from God's point of view. You can be born from above. You can live forever. Wouldn't you like to start today?

