Study Notes for the Sunday Mass Published by Christians for Christ Ministries. We are a non-denominational Christian ministry that seeks to encourage and facilitate Christians in studying the Holy Scriptures. **"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus."** 1 Timothy 2:5

Mass Study Notes for Sunday 6-15-2014



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for 6-15-2014. This week we open with the narrative of Moses' encounter with God on Mount Sinai. This is where God gave Moses the 10 Commandments, which are still guiding lawmakers today. Then we move to the New Testament where we will see the outworking of a higher law, the law of Love. It is God's love for us that allows a new way of living to emerge in us.

The first reading is from Exodus 34. The backdrop to this story includes shame and glory, for this is Moses' second time to receive the law from God on Mount Sinai. The first time ended in shame, for he came down from the mountain to find the people of God worshiping a golden calf (see Exodus 32). The second time ended in glory, for Moses asked to see God's glory and this is what God revealed. The new stone tablets and God's patience with His people are an indication of His character, which this passage describes.

> *4 So he [Moses] cut out two stone tablets like the former ones, and Moses rose up early in the morning and went up to Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and he took two stone tablets in his hand. 5 The LORD descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the LORD. 6 Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; 7 who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations." 8 Moses made haste to bow low toward the earth and worship. 9 He said, "If now I have found favor in Your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go along in our*

> *midst, even though the people are so obstinate, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Your own possession." (Exodus 34:4-9)*

The importance of this passage may be missed by its brevity and simplicity. But let us not underestimate the foundational nature of this revelation of the character of God to His people. Remember, the newly released Hebrew people had just been delivered from being ruled by the Egyptians as slaves. You can take the slave out of Egypt, but something internal has to happen in order to take the mentality of a slave out of the person of God. A revelation of God's true nature would be the antidote to the slave mentality. Here is what we learn about God from this passage:

- God is a self-disclosing, self-revealing God. He desires to make Himself known to His people. Without God first revealing Himself to people, humans would have no way of knowing Him. The Hebrew people were his special chosen people to reveal His character. How would they reveal His character without knowing Him? The self-revealing nature of God is the foundation of relationship with God to all people. This is His grace.
- The word "LORD" which is used as His special covenantal name for the Jewish people, means "I AM". This reveals that God is ever-present and absolutely existent. The Hebrew people needed to know that the God of their fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, was also their ever-present Father as well.
- God is compassionate and gracious. These words are packed with depth and the rest of the Bible should be understood in light of God's character of compassion and grace. Here are some helpful definitions. **Compassionate:** refers to deep love (usually of a superior for an inferior) rooted in some natural bond (i.e. Mother to child; Father to child). Compassion is the deep feeling one for another who is totally helpless, and usually results in providing aid to the one who is in need. Mercy and forgiveness go hand in hand with compassion.
- God is slow to anger: contrary to popular belief, God is not capricious in His display of anger, nor is He looking for people to burn up with His wrath. He is patient and wanting people to repent, not desiring that any should perish (1 Timothy 2:4).
- God is abounding in love and faithfulness. Abounding connotes the overflowing and abundant nature of God's love and faithfulness. He's not going to run out! The word for love used here means loving-kindness. The two characteristics put together mean that God is fiercely loyal to His children. We can count on Him to love and to forgive.
- God is also just. He will punish the sin of the guilty who have not brought themselves to Him in surrender. It would be unloving for God to allow injustice to prevail. So even in His punishment of wickedness, God is exercising His loving faithfulness.
- When God's glory is revealed, the only appropriate place for humans to be is bowed to the ground, worshiping.
- When God's glory is revealed, Moses wanted God to go with him and the people. He could not envision being alone in this world. God's presence is appealing, we do not have to protect ourselves from getting "too much of God."
- When God's glory is revealed, Moses recognized the sinful state of himself and the people. God's glory makes us more self-aware of our own short-comings. Our shabby excuses don't really hold up in God's presence, therefore we must rely on God's grace in order to stand in

His presence.

- "Brethren": shows that those who are in Christ are in a family relationship. The laws that govern a family are higher than a governmentally enforced system. Family relationships are governed by the higher law of love.
- "Rejoice": why must Paul command the Corinthians to rejoice? He must know that it is easier for humans to be critical and despair over life than it is to rejoice. We must be reminded that we have a lot to be thankful for.
- "Be made complete": reminds us of the believer's status in Christ. We are positionally complete in Christ (for Jesus cried "It is finished" from the cross), but it takes some effort on our part to live out the reality of this new status.
- "Be comforted": Paul started this letter telling the Corinthians that the God of all comfort will comfort them in their troubles (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). He closes it by encouraging them to appropriate the comfort that only God can give.
- "Be like-minded and live in peace": means that Christians should seek to live in an understanding way with each other, allowing the Truth to unite us.
- "and the God of love and peace will be with you": Is He not with us when we are living contrary to these commands. Well, in a way, yes. It is true that God is omnipresent. His love and peace is available to all people at all times. But the difference between having God's love and peace and not having God's love and peace is the choice we as humans make to accept or reject who God is in our lives. If we live contrary to His ways, His love and peace will not be in us. If we want to have the God of love and peace making His presence known to us, we have simply to ask and receive, making room for Him to manifest Himself in us and through us. We can't have His love and peace without having Him.
- "Greet one another with a holy kiss": this actual practice may not be common in our churches anymore, but we have similar expressions of fellowship by shaking hands, giving a hug or smiling across the aisle at someone. The idea behind this is to be welcoming and inclusive with others who are in fellowship with us in our local places of worship.
- "All the saints greet you": this closing phrase gives Saint Paul's theology of sainthood. He frequently uses the word "saint" to describe genuine believers in Christ (1 Cor. 1:2, 2 Cor. 1:1; Philippians 1:1). He opened the letter to the Ephesians by saying: "To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 1:1). God gives the status of saint to all who have bowed their knee to Jesus as Lord, for now Christ's righteousness is credited to our account (2 Corinthians 5:21). That is what makes us a saint before God.
- To receive His free gift of eternal life by believing in Jesus
- To receive His forgiveness for a particular sin that you previously thoughts was too big for God to forgive
- To treat another Christian as a brother/sister
- To recognize your identity as a saint and make choices based on this
- To be "like-minded" with other Christians over the truth
- To be comforted by the God of all comfort
- To let God's compassion and grace be your interpretive framework for the circumstances of your life

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> **Gracious: unmerited favor,** the root word depicts a heartfelt response by someone who has something to give to one who has a need; it is an adjective that describes the generous acts of Yahweh. It is generous in the sense that it is not deserved. Mercy is when you don't get the bad that you deserve; Grace is when you get the good that you don't deserve. God demonstrates both compassion and grace toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

In this passage we also learn some things about people and the proper response to God as seen in Moses:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians Chapter 13. This is the close of Saint Paul's letter and serves as a reminder of the sort of people that God calls us to be now that we have entered into relationship with Him. Since we know Him to be compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love, we can be people who are growing to look more and more like Him.

> *11 Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. 12 Greet one another with a holy kiss. 13 All the saints greet you. (2 Corinthians 13:11-13)*

Paul has had a tenuous relationship with the Corinthian believers, with multiple visits and multiple letters used to try to point them to what it looks like to live differently than the pagans. The relationship one has with Christ as Savior ushers us into a new way of life that does not operate according to the world's system. Therefore, he summarizes his message with instruction on how to live out the Christian life.

The Gospel reading is from John Chapter 3. Verse 16 is the famous verse which is often seen printed on signs being waived by people at various sporting events. The context of this section is the conclusion of a meeting that happened at night between Jesus and Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews (John 3:1), meaning that he was a member of the Sanhedrin that is the Jewish ruling council. Evidently, Nicodemus feared the reaction of the Jews so he met secretly with Jesus. Later in John's Gospel, Nicodemus came with Joseph or Arimathea to prepare Jesus' body for burial (John 19:39), an action which revealed his willingness to make a bold, public statement about his identification with Jesus.

> *"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. 18 He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." (John 3:16-18)*

We see in this passage once again that God's love is the foundation for life that is eternal. It is God's

love that moved Him to give His one and only Son. "Begotten" is a translation of a Greek word that has the connation of being unique. So to clarify, John is saying that there is no one else like God's Son Jesus. He is the only one of His kind and He was given to us to provide the one and only way to eternal life. As we said earlier, God does not want people to perish (1 Tim. 2:4). His love compelled Him to send His Son into the world to be our Savior. So what separates those who have eternal life and those who are perishing? Belief in Jesus Christ. Belief is a robust word that connotes trust, relationship, and knowledge that is applied to one's life. While we grow in our belief in Jesus, we must clarify whether we truly believe or not. We must have a place of entry into the life of Christ. Do we want Him or not? If we reject Him, then we stand condemned already. Our unforgiven sin leaves no other option than to be judged by God at the end of our lives. But if we turn to Jesus in faith and rest our hope for salvation in Him, then we are saved. That is why He came to this world, to save. Have you entered into the life of Christ by putting your faith in His atoning death on the cross and receiving His resurrection power for daily living? If you want to do so, you can make that decision right now and talk to God about wanting to put your faith in Christ. The following prayer may help you to express your heart to God:

> *Dear God, your word says that you loved the world, and I trust that that includes me. In your love you gave your one and only Son, Jesus, to bring me eternal life. I realize that without the gift of Your Son, my life will end in eternal death, it will perish. I need Jesus to be my Savior. I want to believe in Him. And even though I don't know exactly what that means or entails, I trust that you will show me how to enter into His life and be saved. I trust in Jesus to save me from the eternal consequences of my sin. I believe in You, Jesus, and receive your free gift of eternal life. Now please help me to walk in light of your Truth and love. Change me into the saint that the New Testament declares your people to be. I am Yours, Lord. Amen.*

If you made a decision either now or some time ago to put your belief in Jesus, would you ask God to give you an opportunity to share this good news with someone else? It may be with someone who already knows Jesus, but needs encouragement that God loves them. Or it may be to someone who has never heard of God loving the world so much that He would send His one and only Son to save them from the consequences of their sin. Perhaps you would even be willing to share your testimony on the Christians for Christ website. The good news is so good, we can't keep it to ourselves!

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. We saw God's love in a myriad of ways in this week's reading. Go back through each passage and write out in your own words below some of the ways that you see God's love.

> **Exodus 34**
>
> **2 Corinthians 13**
>
> **John 3**

2. How does the description of God's love in His Word differ from your own understanding of God?

What false notions do you need to reject and what truths do you need to ask God to help you keep in mind?

3. How is God calling you to live in light of His love? Choose one of the points of application below or write out your own:

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass visit this web site: http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/061514.cfm

First Reading EX 34:4B-6, 8-9 (plus skipped verses)

Exodus 34:4-9 NAS95 4 So he cut out two stone tablets like the former ones, and Moses rose up early in the morning and went up to Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and he took two stone tablets in his hand. 5 The LORD descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the LORD. 6 Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; 7 who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations." 8 Moses made haste to bow low toward the earth and worship. 9 He said, "If now I have found favor in Your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go along in our midst, even though the people are so obstinate, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Your own possession."

Second Reading 2 Corinthians 13:11-13

11 Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. 12 Greet one another with a holy kiss. 13 All the saints greet you. 2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Gospel Reading JN 3:16-18

John 3:16-18 NAS95 16 "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. 17 "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. 18 "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Do Catholics and Everyone Need to Be Born Again and How Does it Happen?



Revised and corrected on 2/24/2013

In an article[i] by Roman Catholic apologist Mark Brumley the author answers the question, do Catholics need to be born again?" He opened the article with the headline, "'Have you been born again?' the Fundamentalist at the door asks the unsuspecting Catholic.'

Brumley goes on to explain that as a Roman Catholic one is born again through baptism, and that the fundamentalists are wrong about their understanding of the need for a spiritual conversion experience or confession of salvation through praying of a sinner's prayer. He incorrectly states, among his various false assertions throughout the article, that "The only biblical use of the term "born again" occurs in John 3:3-5 . . . although, as we shall see, similar and related expressions such as 'new birth' and 'regeneration' occur elsewhere in Scripture (Titus 3:5; 1 Pet 1:3, 23)"[ii]

What's at stake with being wrong on the answer to this question whether one needs to be born again to go to heaven? What happens if one sticks with a false belief for their entire life and then passes into realm of the dead with an incorrect understanding? Would a just God condemn a person just because they held an improper belief about this one thing?

The Bible records not one use; as stated by Brumley, of the phrase translation "born again," but three. One may do a search for themselves through the use of a popular online Bible study tool called Blue Letter Bible by visiting the web page cited below.[iii] From a quick search we see that there are actually three mentions of this exact phrase, two in the Gospel of John and another in the Epistle of First Peter. Delving a little deeper into study through the use of this online study tool we find that if one clicks on the number just to the right of the phrase we can locate the underlying

word in the Greek (or Hebrew, depending upon if we are looking at the New or Old Testament) original. In this case we see by using that web site tool that the original word is "anothen."[iv] We urge the reader to follow the links and see this for themselves. Without even a basic understanding of the pronunciation of the Greek we can find that the word was most likely read in a way sounding like "ah – know – then." Digging a litter bit deeper on the Blue Letter site we see that it reveals that there are thirteen (13) uses of the Greek word in the New Testament! Brumley was mostly correct in his assertion that the other appearances are for related terms but looking over those thirteen we find that the exact phrase does appear one other time outside of John's Gospel and that is in the Epistle of First Peter. We will look at that further in our article.

First, let's read what John was saying about the need to be born again in the Gospel according to third chapter of John. We will hbold the uses of the important phrase that we are studying, and as well will mark the text anytime the phrase is referred to either by Jesus or Nicodemus through the use of brackets [].

John 3:1-14

> 1 There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews:
>
> 2 The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.
>
> 3 Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be **born again**, he cannot see the kingdom of God.
>
> 4 Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time **[born again]** into his mother's womb, and be born?
>
> 5 Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit **[born again]**, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.
>
> 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.
>
> 7 Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be **born again**.
>
> 8 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.
>
> 9 Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be?
>
> 10 Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?

> 11 Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness.
>
> 12 If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?
>
> 13 And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.
>
> 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up:[v]

We see from a simple reading of the text above that Jesus mentioned the phrase "born again" to Nicodemus no less than three times and Nicodemus evidently understood since he repeated it to Jesus in verse four. Jesus said very clearly in the text; we are paraphrasing, "you must be born both physically (which happens by default) and spiritually (born again, 'anothen') to enter the kingdom of heaven." Again, you must be born spiritually to enter the kingdom of heaven either in the present sense to become a Christian or in the eternal sense, go to heaven. Regardless of the intellectual musings of the noted Catholic apologist can you see that you must be born again? Can you also see that being born again is a mystery done through the Holy Spirit such that even the learned Jewish teacher Nicodemus didn't understand at this point in his life? How could he when the church was yet a mystery to be revealed after the rejection of Messiah Jesus?

A critical question arises. How does one become "born again," is it through being baptized in the Roman Catholic Church *and* faith in Jesus Christ as alleged by Mark Brumley or through faith in Jesus Christ alone? Let's look at what the Bible has to say about this very important necessity of having to be born again to enter the kingdom of heaven. In Ephesians chapter two we find Paul stating the following about how one enters the kingdom, or becomes born again (emphasis added):

> 8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:
>
> 9 Not of works, lest any man should boast.
>
> 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.[vi]

At the same time as we reason the meaning of those verses consider one of the other mentions of the exact Greek word (anothen) in I Peter 1 verse 3 (emphasis added): "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be **born again** to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." From these two biblical texts we answer the question, "Who (or what) causes someone to be born again (anothen)? Is it the work of another in baptizing us and through our faith in Jesus, or the work of God alone through faith in Jesus? Can we see that it is God at work here, through the instrument of our faith, which God has given to us as a gift, if we accept the free gift?

Let's look at another passage (emphasis added). In Romans Paul explains this concept of salvation through faith alone a bit further. "9 That if thou shalt **confess with thy mouth** (*this is the sinner's prayer mentioned by Brumley*) the Lord Jesus, and shalt **believe in thine heart** (*faith alone!*) that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. 10 For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."[vii] The sinner's prayer *does* appear in the Bible! The Bible is clear that we believe through God's gift of a changed heart and then as evidence we confess to others this belief and together we can have the certainty that we are saved. John said in the Book of First John, verse thirteen, "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may **know that ye have eternal life**, and that ye may **believe** on the name of the Son of God."[viii] We can know and believe, or know through belief, that we are in the kingdom of heaven, both in a present sense as we live our lives as believers, and in a future sense that when we die we will go to heaven. Far be it from what the Roman Catholics call the "sin of presumption," we can have this certainty right now.

As a former Roman Catholic we came to the knowledge of truth back in 1999 I make a tearful request that you consider the truths of what God says through His Bible about finding eternal life through the Lord Jesus Christ. I urge you to see these truths for yourself, like what Nicodemus died in his inquires of Jesus. If you would like to read a deeper analysis of Jesus' discuss with Nicodemus in John Chapter 3 of the Bible please consider another article that we wrote which is posted on our web site.[ix]

May God bless your journey towards the truth. My prayer is that you are not misled by our enemy to misguide you into believing that you are saved through being a "good person," weekly attendance of mass on Sundays and "holy days of obligation," and obtaining the sacraments of the Catholic Church. You are saved by faith in the Lord Jesus and even that faith is a gift from God because there is none that does good, no not one, all of us have turned away, for "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God."[x]

Jim Hill, Winona Lake, Indiana

End Notes

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[i] Brumley, Mark, Catholic Education Resource Center. [http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/apologetics/ap0022.html] cited 2/23/2013.

[ii] Ibid.

[iii] Blue Letter Bible.

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[http://www.blueletterbible.org/search/translationResults.cfm?Criteria=born+again&t=KJV] cited 2/23/2013.

[iv] Ibid. [http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=G509&t=KJV] cited 2/23/2013. All Bible verses are from the King James Version (KJV).

[v] Bible Gateway. [http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=john%203:1-14&version=KJV] cited 2/23/2013.

[vi] Ibid. [http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=ephesians%202:8-10&version=KJV] cited 2/23/2013.

[vii] Ibid. [http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=romans%2010:9-10&version=KJV]. Cited 2/23/2013.

[viii] Ibid. [http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20john%205:13&version=KJV]. Cited 2/23/2013.

[ix] See http://www.christiansforchrist.org/articles/bible-studies/where-does-spiritual-life-come-from

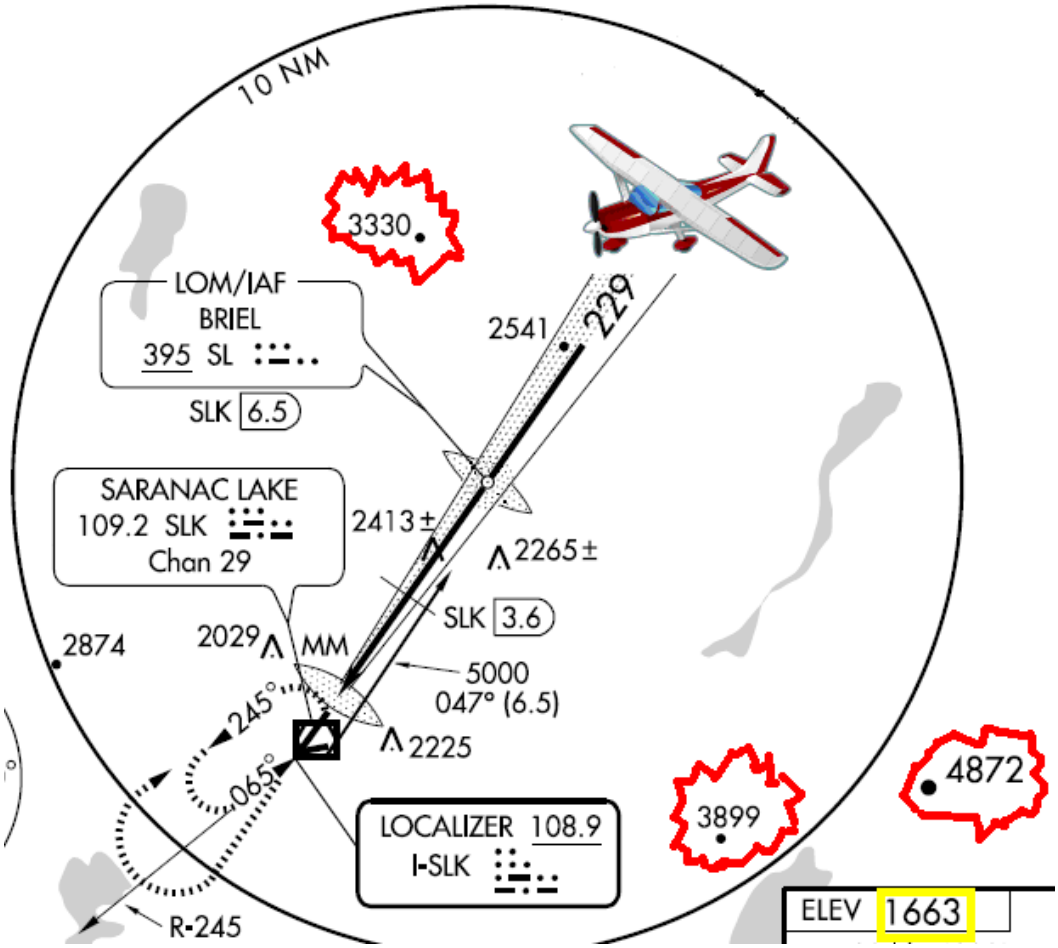
[x] Bible Gateway. [http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=romans%203:23&version=KJV]. Cited 2/23/2013.

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Where does Spiritual Life Really Come From?

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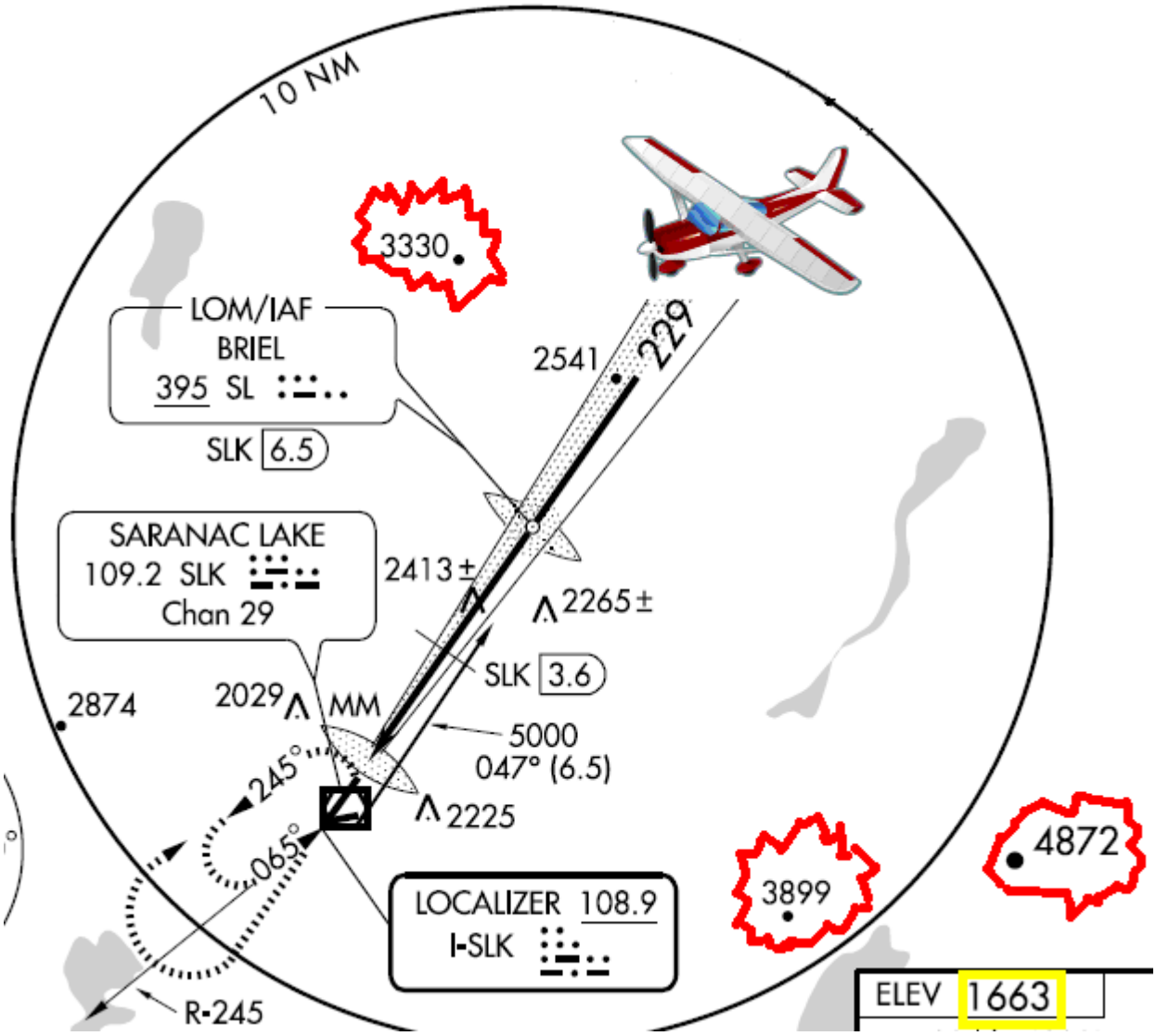


Where does Spiritual Life Come From?

Spiritual Sally loved going to her Bible-believing church—she was the one that everyone called when they needed someone to pray for them. Why do some people develop spiritual insights while others, or even whole churches full of people, seem to remain in the dark? What do these enlightened, "Spiritual Sallys" have that the others do not? The prophet Hosea 4:6 said, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." Flashing forward to the Book of Acts in the New Testament, Philip asked the Ethiopian eunuch who was reading the Old Testament, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The eunuch answered, "Well, how could I unless someone guides me? (Acts 8:30-31)." The passage this Bible lesson will lead us through shows a similar situation for Nicodemus in chapter three of John's Gospel, a man without a complete understanding of the things of God. How could he understand spiritual life except if Jesus explained it to him? Since spiritual life is a crucially important mystery entirely done by God, we must trust in Jesus and not our own wisdom.

Before we turn to the text, another illustration from my life might help set the stage for faith. It was a classic dark and stormy night, and I was flying with two friends in my small airplane from Troy, Michigan, to the resort town of Lake Placid, New York, to do some snowboarding. It was a 2 ½ hour trip, and the time went fast with all of us using oxygen pipes because we needed to stay out of the icy clouds down low. As we approached the airport area, I added a layer of intensity to the white knuckle situation. I told my passengers I would need to concentrate until we landed, so they should not say anything unless it was an emergency. As we descended and were in the clouds, it was pitch black. We started having some rather sporting turbulence. This added another element to this inky black approach.

The pilot's navigational chart below, which I have annotated, shows the approach route. That little shaded area is the route inside of which I had to fly. The lens-shaped images are electronic radio beacons that serve as aural reminders through the radio navigation system.



This is why things were a bit more interesting. See those three jagged circles? Those are mountains! The box marked ELEV at the bottom indicates the elevation of the airport. Looking closely, you may see that the airport elevation is some two thousand feet lower than the three mountains. In fact, the one on the bottom of this drawing is three thousand feet above the airport! Boy, that's a bit

interesting to be flying into there at ten o'clock at night, in solid clouds, with moderate turbulence and two friends who have never been on a long trip in a small plane!

The air traffic controller had a very gentle, nonchalant voice. HE wasn't the one who had to fly between mountains! "Bonanza nine eight zero quebec, descend and maintain seven thousand, cleared for the ILS 23 approach." As we were maneuvering and descending, I knew that the mountains were out there, because of what others had told me – the ATC controller, my charts, and my instruments. Did I mention that we were flying between two large, rugged mountains that wouldn't budge if we ran into them?

I would fly safely into that upstate New York mountain airport that night. Since I was a very experienced pilot, I had to believe and trust in the air traffic controller, my instruments, and my flight training. That's what spiritual life is about, trusting and believing in Jesus Christ, not ourselves. Paul said this in Ephesians 2:8-9, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— [9] not by works, so that no one can boast." But how can we trust in something we can't see? We do it all the time. We use electricity, and we know about magnetism. Just because we can't see them doesn't mean they aren't there. So just because we can see spiritual life doesn't mean it isn't there. But we can sense it; see the evidence of God working in people's lives.

Can you really understand spiritual life and being born again? Even if you can provide some descriptions of people who seem to have spiritual lives versus people who don't, it still does not explain where they come from and how they work. Like the wind, like electricity, you know when it's there, but you still can't see it. You may even be able to explain its characteristics, but you do not know its origins or the extent of its power. That's because it's a mystery. Spiritual life is a mystery. Perhaps even more of the mystery is that we must trust in Jesus Christ. This is what we are going to find next in our Bible study. Since spiritual life is a crucially important mystery entirely done by God, we must trust in Jesus, not ourselves.

Let's go back to my story about flying to New York. Can you imagine what that would have been like, hitting the side of a mountain? Flying along in a nice warm airplane with your friends one minute, and the next minute you are gripped in a few seconds of sheer panic as you try to cope with the incomprehensible circumstances of the last few moments of your life? What was worse was that I was shepherding my friends on the plane that night; they trusted me to keep them safe. I felt a great responsibility for them. So it is with this Bible study message. I have a great responsibility to bring you the truth. We will read an account of Jesus talking with Nicodemus, a pious Rabbi. We are going

to see that Nicodemus reasoned with Jesus, that Jesus had a great responsibility to tell Nicodemus the truth to keep him from proverbially "slamming into a mountain" along with his friends.

Let's read the Bible in John chapter three:

> John 3:1-12 NKJV 1 There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." 3 Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." 4 Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit." 9 Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? 11 "Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. 12 "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

One of the things that Jesus points out to Nicodemus is that since spiritual life is a crucially important mystery entirely done by God, we must trust in Jesus for eternal life and not in ourselves. We must hear this as good news, for our strivings have failed to earn us the right to be called God's children.[1] Hearing the Gospel, which means "good news," should elicit a response or an action on our part. Even though Nicodemus did not understand the fullness of the Gospel, he must have seen something different in Jesus than the other religious leaders. Being around Jesus elicited a response. In verse 2, the text says, "This man came to Jesus by night." Nicodemus took both great initiative and significant risk in meeting with Jesus. Jesus, on the other hand, took time out of his busy schedule and met with him, likely after teaching all day himself. "Nick" came at night, Nick at night, and took some considerable risk in doing so. We know he was one of the Jewish Supreme Court's Sanhedrin. This shows Nick's great initiative, since he was a very public figure, and even meeting with Jesus at night brought elements of danger if the rest of the ruling council discovered this secret meeting. In the same way, we have to take some initiative in seeking God. Perhaps this is the secret of the spiritual Sallys. Often, he won't just appear to us in a vision; we need to pursue him. For most of us, the hard knocks of life force this seeking. Questions like, "Where is God in the midst of my pain?" or "Why did God allow this to happen to me?" cause us to seek spiritual answers to life's most profound questions. Finding spiritual life takes some personal initiative. We must search for truth,

and when we hear the Gospel, "good news" of being saved by grace, that is our opportunity to act upon the message.

Looking back on my life, there was a time when I left a mechanical engineering job in automotive plastics and went to work running a consulting company with my brother. I distinctly remember kneeling and praying to God to reveal Himself to me. If you have already found God, you may celebrate this today. If you have not, I ask that you consider taking this step towards Him. Pray something like, "God, please show yourself to me. Show me how you have revealed yourself in my past, through miracles and people you have sent my way."

Returning to our text in John chapter three, notice that verse 3 reads, "Most assuredly." In the original Greek, this literally reads, "Amen, Amen," a double amen. This meant that whatever Jesus was going to say next was of crucial importance and was undeniably true! Some versions say "most assuredly," some say "verily verily." What Jesus said next was, "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Jesus uses a metaphor of physical birth to describe the dynamics of spiritual beginnings. Spiritual birth is a prerequisite to seeing the kingdom of God.

It's worth pausing momentarily to introduce a theological principle called the principle of first mention. This is a theological principle that the first time something is mentioned in the biblical text, we must pay particular attention. This is the first time we see this double amen, and that's because the subject is of crucial importance: "You must be born again." In other words, spiritual life is crucially important; we must hear and act on the Gospel. The second time we see this double amen in this text is when Jesus gives an illustration regarding this teaching of being born again, a point at which a person receives spiritual life. The third time we see this phrase in this short passage of 12 verses, Jesus points out that he is the resident expert on heavenly things because he comes from heaven. His ability to be accurate is undeniable.

Another principle arises from the text. Spiritual life is a mystery. Since we can't figure it out, we have to trust. At first, this may seem like "bad news" for it is difficult for us to give up control and trust another person. But it is good news if we think about it further, for we often find that we can't even trust ourselves. I make New Year's resolutions that I can't keep. I promise people things that I end up not fulfilling. I fail at living up to my standards of being good, let alone God's. So the mystery of spiritual life can be "good news" if we end ourselves and our own failed efforts.

We find that Jesus used two different word puns in the text, one to explain his point and one to

illustrate it – just like a good preacher would do! Notice what happened in verse 4. Nicodemus misunderstood Jesus' use of a particular word in the original text, meaning "again" and "from above." From this context, we can clearly see that Jesus meant you must be born "from above," which refers to the working of God. But Nick thought he meant "again". He gives his misunderstanding away by his question: "Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" There is a second word pun that Jesus used in the text. In verses 8 and 9, Jesus illustrated using something Nick could understand – the wind. Again, we see that Jesus used a Greek word that could be understood in two ways. The word is "pneuma" and is where we get our word "pneumatic." It meant either "wind" or "spirit." Jesus used these two words to bring out a crucially important truth: Spiritual life is a mystery, we can't figure it out, we have to trust. We can't see the wind but know it's there; the wind is mysterious. So it is with spiritual life. We can see its effects, but we cannot see it like picking an apple from a tree! We have to trust. In verse 12, we know the word "believe" twice. Jesus is accusing Nicodemus, and by extension all of the Jews, of unbelief. Jesus is saying that you must believe to receive this spiritual life.

Looking back to the night we were flying into Lake Placid, I remember an important detail. We ran into some extremely turbulent air. When I looked back, one of my passengers was turning green and hanging on for dear life! None of us would have argued that the wind was there, yet we couldn't see it, control it, or calm it. This was the illustration that Jesus used to explain to Nicodemus the nature of spiritual life. Like the wind, he couldn't see it; it was mysterious. We must trust Jesus that spiritual life is real, like the wind, even though we can't see or control it. Spiritual life is a mystery; we can't figure it out, we have to trust.

Third and finally, another spiritual principle emerges from the text. God entirely does spiritual life; therefore, we must depend on Him for our future. In our analysis above, we spoke about a word that Jesus used in verse 3 that meant either "born again" OR "born from above." Jesus used the word purposefully, knowing that to be born again was a birth that came only from above. Spiritual birth is entirely a work done by God! Verse 3 says, "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Jesus testified in verse 11 that He knew what He was talking about when He said that you must be born again and that the Holy Spirit did this. Jesus knew because He came from heaven. He is the God-man, the incarnate Savior of the world! In verse 12, Jesus said that if you don't believe me because of my simple illustrations concerning water and wind, how could we understand more complex truths? If we were to look back to chapter one of John's Gospel we would find in verse 12-13, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood (family line), nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God (emphasis added).

Next, when Jesus said in verse 5 that we must be born of water and the Spirit, Nicodemus would

have immediately recognized that Jesus was paraphrasing a specific teaching from the Old Testament, in Ezekiel 36:

> *Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Ezekiel 36:25-27*

Jesus meant that spiritual birth was done by God, not by water baptism or physical birth. We cannot depend upon others for our salvation; we must rely on God! God entirely does spiritual life; therefore, depend on Him for your future.

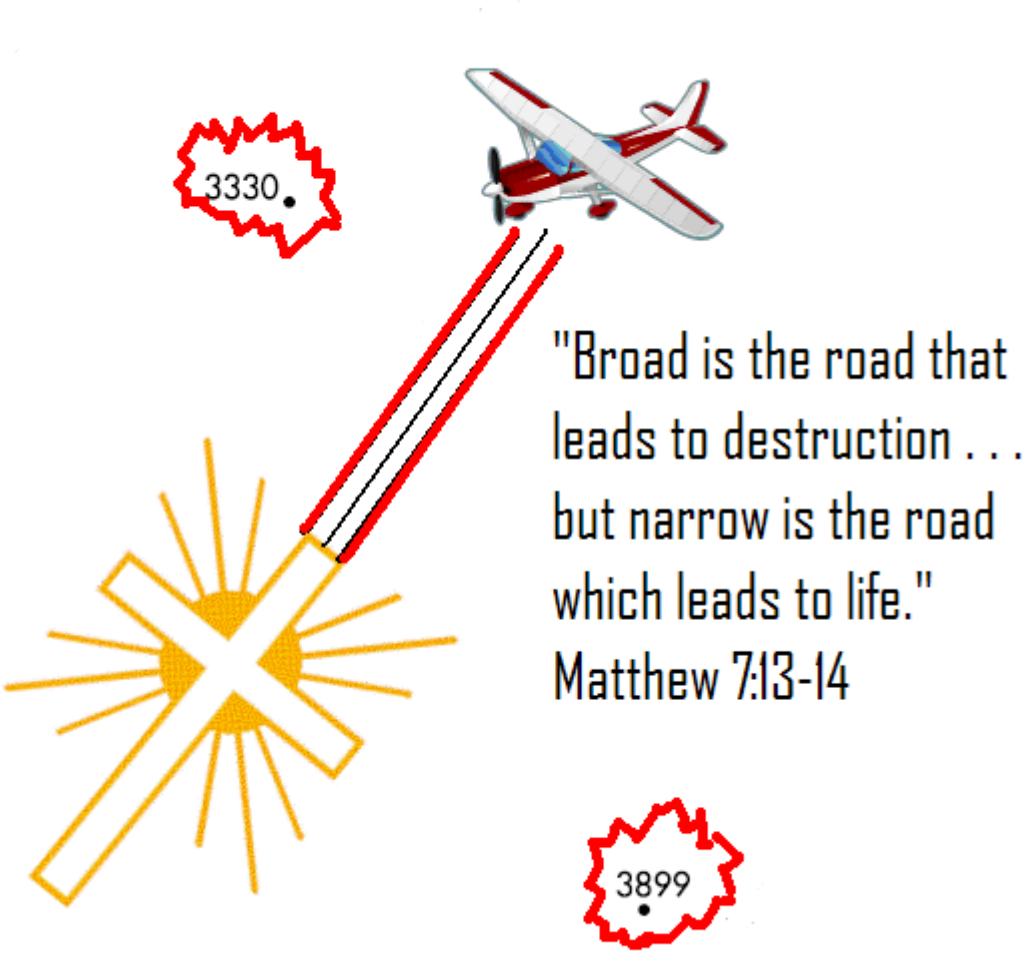
I recently watched a video called "Man in a Hole," which you can watch online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEpoHO_Ox6A. [You can watch the video in the window at the bottom of this article.]

In this spiritually themed presentation, a dingy-looking young man was trapped in a deep hole with vertical, slippery sides, making it impossible to climb out to safety. The narrator tells how the man was offered various escape options by enlightened ones fortunate enough to be at the top of the chasm. At one point, he was told he would escape by being a good person, eventually finding Nirvana. Another one told him to pray five times facing east. At the video's conclusion, our lonesome, lost soul is offered real hope by a person who offered to descend into the world himself to carry him and save him. This is what Jesus did for us. He descended into the lowly parts of the earth for us, to save us from our sin. We cannot pull ourselves out of our holes, up from our bootstraps, by being good and going to church. We have to believe in Jesus and let our faith in his work done on the cross save us. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Jesus had to come and die for us to rescue us from the "hole" that we are in.

Our text said we must be spiritually born again by faith in Jesus Christ. God says in His Word, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). "But while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:28). "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). "You must be born again" (John 3:3). Jesus lowered himself down into our world. God became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory. Jesus came to

earth for the express purpose of dying for our sins, the perfect man bearing the guilt and shame for our transgressions against each other and against God himself. The debt we owe can be paid in one of two ways. The default mode is for us to pay in hell for eternity. Or the faith way is to be born again, by trusting in Jesus' payment for our sin on the cross. His righteousness is credited to our account; the debt has been paid.[2] The choice is now ours. Acting on this as good news (the Gospel) means to accept Jesus as our Savior and look to Him for a new way of life. It is a radical life change, where Jesus is now in charge, and we surrender to his will in our lives. If we were already good people, our outward lives might not drastically change. But the inward motivation for our goodness now comes because Jesus lives inside us. We want to live His life for us in our daily interactions and choices. Our goodness is not self-effort; it is a fruit (or result) of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.[3]

Looking back again to when I was flying to Lake Placid, New York that night, I remember that I started thinking about the mountains being down there at one point. Then I remembered that if I turned the weather radar so that it pointed downwards, I would be able to see both mountains on either side of the plane, and hopefully I was going directly between them! It was a very narrow approach. For an essential illustration of this principle, study the picture below, a modification of the navigational chart we looked at before.



The approach to the airport between the dangerous mountains was narrow. Jesus said in the Gospel of Matthew, "Broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many go by it. But narrow is the road which leads to life, and few find it." Some do not like the "narrowness" of Jesus' teaching. They think that many roads lead to God. They want everyone's opinions to be correct. But if there is actual danger on either side of the narrow path (like there was in my flying experience), then it is actually

the kindest, most loving thing to do for Jesus to tell us that He is the way, the truth, and the life; that no one comes to the Father except through him.[4] There are a lot of mountains out there to run into along the broad road. But trusting Jesus for salvation is the narrow road to being born again. Jesus said that being born again is the prerequisite to seeing the kingdom of God.

Let's summarize our biblical message. We saw that spiritual life is a crucially important mystery done completely by God. We must trust in Jesus and not in ourselves. Hearing the Gospel and acting on it means recognizing the free gift of salvation through Christ as good news and asking him to be our payment for the debt we owe. Spiritual birth brings us into a right relationship with God, the Father, as we depend on Him for our future.

But how do we receive spiritual life, become a spiritual person?

1. Repent of our sin. This means that we must have a change of heart, a conscious turning away from our sin.

2. Believe the Gospel: Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, came to earth to die for us, rose from the dead, returned to heaven, and will come again.

3. Let God do the rest, pray that God gives us our spiritual life, pray to Him, and ask to be "born again."

If you want to receive spiritual life today and become born again, you can do so. A simple prayer, expressing your belief in Jesus begins the new life that God has for you. I urge you to pray right now, and after you are done to tell someone about it.

Dear Father, I have broken your laws, *and my sins have separated me from you. I am genuinely sorry, and now I want to turn away from my past sinful life and turn toward you. I believe your son, Jesus Christ, died for my sins, was resurrected from the dead, is alive, and hears my prayer. I invite*

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*Jesus to become the Lord of my life, to rule and reign in my heart from this day forward. Please forgive me, and help me avoid sinning again. Please send your Holy Spirit to help me obey You, and to do Your will for the rest of my life. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.**[5]***

Please let me know how this study impacted your life. Our contact information can be found here. Please comment or send a link to this article to a friend.

Jim Hill

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[1] "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name . . ."(John 1:12).

[2] "He made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

[3] "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5:22-24).

[4] John 14:6

[5] Source: http://www.sinner-prayer.com/