



He was a religious leader who sought Jesus out in the dark of night. He knew Jesus' miracles were proof that God was with him and he wanted to be part of his kingdom. But he had no idea what it would demand from him.

Perhaps Nicodemus wanted some instructions to follow, new rules that would let him in on the life Jesus lived. But Jesus didn't offer any. He simply told him that he needed to be born all over again. The idea sent Nicodemus' head spinning as he tried to conceive how he, an old man, could be born a second time. Jesus must have smiled at the thought.

It was not a physical rebirth that Nicodemus needed, but a spiritual one. He already knew all too well how to live as a human in the world. If he was going to see into the reality of this coming kingdom he needed a rebirth of the Spirit. Why? Because nothing in this kingdom can be seen, embraced or pursued by the flesh no matter how well intentioned. It runs contrary to every way our flesh sees and acts.

What's surprising here is that there was no conflict between Nicodemus' flesh and being a religious leader. While his religion at one level sought to restrain his fleshy appetites, it also provided a way for it to satisfy others, such as a lust for power or spiritual status. But the kingdom Jesus was bringing was different. It offered Nicodemus not another performance standard but a completely different way of living. To embrace that would take a rebirth of the Spirit that would open his spiritual eyes. And that's when Jesus drops the bombshell. 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. (John 3:8)

I could understand how the Spirit was like the wind that we can't define or control, but the

thought that those who are born of him are like that as well captured my heart the first time I heard these words as a young man. I don't even remember who was reading them or where I was, but I remember to this day how those words filled my heart with an irresistible call of mystery and adventure. Every time I've read John's gospel since, those words re-ignite that same passion of living that religion at it's best could never produce.

Born Again

We have certainly cheapened this passage in the past 50 years by applying the term 'born again' to those who have said a sinner's prayer, been baptized, or those who go to a 'Bible-believing' fellowship as opposed to a more liberal one. The term 'born again' is often used today synonymously with the term 'evangelical' to validate a conservative brand of Christianity and question the faith of others who don't use the same label. We have turned a term Jesus used to invite people into his kingdom into the most divisive term in Christendom, proving that we missed his point entirely.

If Jesus were going to define his kingdom by a creed, this was his time to say it. If Nicodemus could see the kingdom by participating in certain rituals or sacraments or ascribing to the ethics of a Godly life, Jesus would have told him here. Jesus was not refining the religion of the Old Covenant; he was offering a new way of living that was indefinable and incomprehensible to the natural mind.

Nicodemus didn't need new principles; he needed to start his spiritual journey all over again. The religion he knew so well could never evolve into a life-transforming faith. Being born again meant that in spiritual things he needed to lay down everything he thought he knew and learn a life based on the Spirit. Jesus knew that would be difficult for a man so steeped in religion, and Nicodemus' ensuing struggle over Jesus' words demonstrated how right he was.

And so it is with us. The more we have been schooled in religious activity, the more difficult it is to see this kingdom for what it really is. We have millions of people on the planet today claiming to be born again who don't have the foggiest idea who Jesus is or how to live in his reality. They may subscribe to Christian beliefs, follow Christian ethics and practice Christian rituals, but they do not know how to ride the wind of his Spirit and be transformed by him.

Being born again is a real process that opens our eyes and heart to participate in a kingdom that supersedes the material world we've all been taught to live in.

Riding the Wind

To illustrate this rebirth Jesus turns to the wind as a metaphor and describes three things that are true about it.

It blows where it wills. No man controls the wind. Even with our increased technology it is controlled by forces larger than humanity can influence. There are times we might like for it to stop or blow a different direction, but there isn't a blasted thing we can do about it.

You hear its sound. While the wind is invisible, we can hear it, feel it on the skin and see its effects on the world around us. We've just endured about a week's worth of Santa Ana winds that consistently blew 25-30 miles per hour and often gusted up to 50. One morning our street was filled with garbage as trashcans had been overturned on collection day.

You cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. Haven't you ever wondered where all that wind comes from and where it ends up? I know it swirls around high and low pressure areas, but I don't know where the wind swirling around my face began that morning or where it will end that evening.

What an excellent metaphor to describe the working of the Spirit. He is like the wind, blowing where he wills, unseen but not knowable and it is true that we mostly have no idea what he's up to on any given day. And while all that may be true, that's not what Jesus was saying. He compares the wind to everyone born of the Spirit.

That's you and me! Those born of the Spirit move in this world just as Jesus described the wind. They live out of different motivations. You can see the impact they have, even if you can't figure out why they're doing what they do.

People like that used to drive me nuts. When I was a pastor, it bothered me that some of the most spiritual men and women I came across, wouldn't fit into the program the way I wanted them to. They were uninterested in staff positions I dangled before them, and they declined invitations to join our elders. Maybe they weren't as spiritual as I thought.

I came to find out, however, that they were tuned to a higher frequency. When I expressed my frustration to one of them, he answered. "I don't know that I can explain it, but one day you'll know."

I didn't like his answer at all until I heard myself saying almost the exact same words five years later to a group of elders courting me to become their next pastor.

Blown by a Different Wind

Unfortunately most believers have never been exposed to life in Christ like this. They have seen Christianity only as a religion with truths to learn, rules to follow and rituals to observe and have missed the beauty of what life in Jesus can be.

I love the way Paul expressed this to Timothy in warning him to keep the main issue the main issue: "The whole point of what we're urging is simply love—love uncontaminated by self-interest and counterfeit faith, a life open to God." (1 Timothy 1:5 – The Message)

This is a life of love, not obligation. It is not what we know about God that matters as much as knowing his affection for us, and loving others in the same way. Timothy needed to keep that in mind especially where believers had become more enamored with doctrinal controversies of doctrine, rather than living in love.

Notice that this love is uncontaminated by self-interest. We all know what it is to live to our own self-interest, looking to maximize our benefit or to minimize our pain in the circumstances we face. We learned to survive that way in the world. But the wind Jesus was revealing to Nicodemus doesn't operate on self-interest, but the self-giving love of God. That's what will mark his people in the world. It's not hard for us to understand people controlled by self-interest, even when they use their religion to advance their personal goals or say it is in love. But we don't understand people who live by the laying-down-their-lives kind of love that only Jesus can shape in us. Those who are well loved will love well.

I used to think that Christian growth came by learning new truths and putting them into practice. While that can be helpful, more often than not it doesn't work. How many of us have heard a powerful sermon or read an inspired book ready to embrace its message and committed to living it out, and then failed to follow through? Then we blame ourselves for not trying hard enough and only ended up with another standard by which to measure our failures.

That's why he said the Spirit would lead his followers into all truth (John 15). This was not something we could do on our own, like studying algebra or Latin. Jesus challenged Nicodemus not to think of his life as learning a new catalog of information, but to learn to live in love. That would so change the way he lived other people wouldn't recognize him or be able to explain his actions.

A Genuine Trust

Every time I think I've figured out the way God works he'll amaze me yet again—zigging where I would have zagged, giving strength in the face of circumstances I would have cured, or suddenly and conspicuously absent from the plans and routines that I hoped would contain him.

That used to frustrate me. It doesn't any more. I am finally settled in the reality that he wouldn't do anything the way I would. I'm convinced of the fact that he does all things well, even if he doesn't do them for my comfort or convenience. And I am convinced that following him is the only real way to live, circumstance by circumstance, task by task, obedience by obedience. And I have come to love it that way.

The pursuit to find any formula that can be applied to produce his righteousness, provide me New Testament church life or even grow my trust, is a fool's errand. It will fail time and time again until in the end I come to realize that this reality only comes through a growing friendship with him. The more I know him and the more I see his hand at work the freer I will be to trust him and live in his kingdom.

I am convinced that wind is his Spirit, and my need to be born again is not a one-time experience but a daily choice to shed my expectations about the way things should be, to mistrust my own desires and agenda, and to tune my mind to the breath of his Spirit and the truths of his word. Where I live born of the Spirit today, I will ride that wind with increasing joy and freedom. I will see his fingerprints in the jagged places of life and be able to cooperate with his purpose in me.

Where I live out of my own selfish-ambition, religious performance, or natural wisdom I will struggle with unanswerable questions and act in ways that are hurtful to others. I'm so tired of that. And though I'm a long ways from living it perfectly, I want to live no other way—more today than yesterday and more tomorrow than today. And the only way I can do that is continue to live deeply in him, watching for his wind to blow and riding it, even if some of the most significant people in my life can't understand what I'm doing or why. Jesus warned us that would be so.

Following Him, Not An It

Any time we choose to follow a model of spirituality, someone else's formula for success, or an agenda no matter how well intentioned, we will end up walking by our own limited wisdom. The invitation to this kingdom is to follow a person. Jesus doesn't give us the way; he is The Way. He doesn't have life; he is The Life. He doesn't just speak truth; he is The Truth itself. Everything about his kingdom begins and ends in him and we experience that through a growing friendship with him.

That's often the hardest thing for people to see when they have been disillusioned by church life as many define it today. Immediately they begin to look for another way of doing church and jump right back into a different form of religious performance, rather than learning how they can simply follow him.

Part of what Jesus was encouraging Nicodemus to do was to stop trying to put boxes around the life of his Spirit, which can never be contained. Have you ever tried to stuff the wind into a box? Have you ever tried to stop it, or make it blow a different direction? How futile! So is trying to control God's working by boxing it into forms we prefer, or trying to control the outcomes we want from him.

He is the wind. He blows where he wills, and we can follow if we want. The person who is born of the Spirit loses his moorings in the temporal world where the cravings of safety, security and stability must be satisfied. And in doing so we too become like the wind, available to him at each moment to do what he would ask of us.

Obeying the Nudges

Faith doesn't flow from theology; it flows from relationship. From our earliest days he wants to show us how to embrace his unfolding revelation in our lives and teach us how to follow him. I don't know any other way to describe it than to simply be obedient to those nudges he puts in your mind. He might be revealing something about himself, inviting us to some time with him, drawing us to the Bible, or leading us to serve or encourage someone else. Learning to recognize those nudges and follow through on them is what teaches us to distinguish between our desires and his. Those nudges almost always begin not by calling us to grandiose ministries, but teaching us to live outside our self-interest in the mundane ways we can serve others around us.

To many people this may sound like emotion-driven, touchy-feely spirituality. I hear those objections often by those threatened with a life in God they won't be able to control by their

disciplines and doctrines. But they couldn't be more wrong. This is a dance of head and heart together discerning God and his ways. The heart without the head can lead to well intentioned disaster, and the head without the heart will exalt doctrine over love and destroy others with its arrogance.

To grow in this life, I am continually cultivating my relationship with him. I intentionally spend time with him as I grow in my awareness of his working throughout my day. I have a running conversation with him about everything in my life and express my desire to follow his will at every turn. I immerse myself in the story of Scripture, learning how he thinks and acts. I have a steady diet of what God is showing others by what I read and listen to, and the conversations I have with others on this journey.

So how do I sort out his nudges from my own thoughts? Most nudges I get from his Spirit are simple ways of loving and serving people around me. I am not too worried about getting those wrong. There aren't many downsides to serving others. But to have some measure of confidence to step out in a larger action he may be asking of me, I look for four things to come into agreement:

1. An intuitive, growing conviction of his leading over time.
2. Affirmation in the truth and example of Scripture that this is how God works.
3. Confirmation from other brothers and sisters as I discuss it with them.
4. And the reality of unfolding circumstances.

When those voices are in synch, I have greater confidence that I am following him. But you know what? Sometimes all of these line up and I still get it wrong. That's why people born of the Spirit rarely use language like, "God told me to...", and will instead talk in terms of what they sense. They've been wrong enough times not to be so presumptuous, even when they're most certain. I've forged God's name on my agenda a number of times, only to find out later that it was my penmanship all along. But I'm still ready to get up the next day and learn to keep following him. And while I'm willing to pay the consequences for being wrong, I also know he can weave my mistakes into his purposes.

Taking Wing

This is what it means to be born of the Spirit. It has nothing to do with a sinner's prayer or speaking in tongues. It means we've taken wing on a breath of wind that comes from the Father himself and learn to trust his words over our human reasoning and justifications.

It means we lay aside the lies of shame and the demands for performance that drive us from him and find our security in his affection for us and let that transform us. It means finally realizing how our selfish ambitions work against his purpose in us and others around us and laying them down in our growing trust that he knows better than we do and he does all things well.

It means we don't have to have everything figured out to take the next step he's put on our hearts and we no longer have to play for the applause of the crowd. It means we're finally free to surrender our need to think we're in control and know his plans are far better.

What great freedom to realize that I never had the power or wisdom to accomplish God's purposes in my life and how losing confidence in my flesh only frees me to live more dependent on him and more grateful for his working. What a joy to wake up in the uncertain adventure of life and not be distressed at what might happen today, because he is with me!

How could human effort ever produce this? It is the work of his Spirit responding to our desire to know him. My prayer for you in these things is the same one that Paul had for the Thessalonians:

May the Master take your hand and lead you along the path of God's love and Christ's endurance.

(2 Thessalonians 3:5)

By Wayne Jacobsen

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