

March 5, 2023 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

For God so Love YOU!

A diamond, all by itself, is a beautiful thing. But when a diamond is set in a gold ring and surround by other jewels, it looks even more brilliant. The same is true for John 3:16, the most popular verse in the Bible. All by itself, it shines. But in the context of John 3:1-17, it is even more brilliant. Sadly, the dialogue in verses 1-15 is often misunderstood. Why is Jesus talking about a snake in the desert, or being born again, or blowing wind. Let's take a closer look at this beautiful diamond of the gospel in it's full setting.

Nicodemus was as a Pharisee. The Pharisees were something of a men's club for morality. They were hyper-focused on following God's laws. They studied the Old Testament and made sure to keep all of those Old Testament rituals (like sacrifices, fasting, eating kosher, etc.) very carefully. They were sincere about their religion. Nicodemus was a Pharisee who was also a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. Not many Pharisees were members of the Sanhedrin. So, Nicodemus was a very respected and prominent leader in the country.

Most of the Pharisees became proud of their virtuous lifestyle and thought that their good works would get them into heaven. So, when Jesus told them that they were still sinners who needed a Savior, they attacked him. Nicodemus seemed to be a deeper thinker. The fact that Jesus could perform miracles was proof that Jesus was not just an average guy. Nicodemus wanted to learn more. He approached Jesus one evening, probably so that the other Pharisees would not be able to see him and addressed Jesus as, "**Rabbi**," teacher, a sign of respect. He shared his theory that Jesus was a special messenger from God.

The way that Jesus replied makes it seem that he did not hear what Nicodemus said. Verse 3, "**Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.**" In reality, Jesus was getting to the real reason Nicodemus came to see him. Even though Nicodemus was trying his hardest to live a holy life, he knew that he was not perfect. Nicodemus had the nagging thoughts, "How can I be sure that I am in God's kingdom? How can I be sure that I am saved?" When Nicodemus replied (:4), "**How can someone be born when they are old,**" he knew that Jesus was not talking about a physical rebirth, as if someone could go back inside his mother's womb and get a second try at living a good enough life and earning his way into heaven.

Jesus was slowly leading Nicodemus to discover the answer to his nagging question of how he could be sure that he was saved. It was NOT a matter of being born again physically and trying harder to be perfect. "**Flesh gives birth to flesh,**" (:6) Jesus explained. Sinful parents are going to give birth to sinful children. The only way to enter God's kingdom was to be born spiritually (:5), "**of**

water and the Spirit." Those two words – water and spirit – are tied together as a single unit. Jesus was referring to baptism, which gives and strengthens faith. The Holy Spirit is the one who gives us the spiritual rebirth we need (:6), "**the Spirit gives birth to spirit.**" Just like none of us had anything to do with our physical birth, becoming a member of God's kingdom is not something that we did. It's something that happened to us. The Holy Spirit is the one who brings us to faith, who gives us this new spiritual start in life.

There is an amazing story in the newest Forward in Christ about a lady named Lynne Eby. Lynne spent the first 35 years of her life as an atheist, someone who did not believe in God. She wasn't just an atheist, she was a rabid atheist. If she saw someone in the store wearing a cross necklace, she would approach the person and start an argument about how foolish Christianity is. Then she met one of our WELS home missionaries. He spent 2 ½ years studying the Bible with her. Not only is she a confessing Christian now, she is pretty good about sharing her faith as well. There is NO WAY that Lynne planned on being a Christian. The Holy Spirit did it all. He gave her a spiritual rebirth through the gospel.

Coming to faith is not a matter of programming or an intellectual process. Jesus explained (: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.**" Just like we can not predict how or when the wind is going to blow on us, we can not predict how or when the Holy Spirit is going to work on someone's heart. You do not see the Holy Spirit and very rarely does anyone feel that "Aha" moment when they become a believer. The believer knows the Holy Spirit has worked faith in him by the very fact that he believes. If the Holy Spirit had not worked faith in his heart, he would not be a believer.

"**How can this be?**" (:9), Nicodemus asked. The earthly things which Jesus, John the Baptizer and other prophets spoke about included coming to faith, repentance, baptism, etc. If Nicodemus did not "get it" after hearing about those earthly things, how was Nicodemus going to grasp the full extent of God's love that would save sinners in spite of themselves. So, Jesus gave him an example.

While the Old Testament Israelites were on their journey from Egypt to the promised land of Canaan, it happened that the camp was invaded by poisonous snakes. God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. If anyone was bitten by a poisonous snake, they could look at the bronze snake and be healed. There's no way to explain this medically. It was a miracle, just like coming to faith. Just as the people who looked at the bronze snake with faith in God's promise were healed and lived, so also all who look with faith to Jesus on the cross are forgiven and have eternal life.

Remember that this conversation began with Nicodemus wondering how he could be sure that he was saved. The first 15 verses of chapter 3 were the perfect build up to the full proclamation of the gospel in John 3:16. You know this

passage, don't you? Let's recite it. [**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**] If your memory is a little shaky, then cut out the passage from the back of the bulletin, tape it to your refrigerator door handle, and recite it every time you open the refrigerator this week. You'll learn it easy.

Let's pretend, for a moment, that you have never heard this passage before. How would you react to hear it for the first time? For – in this way – God LOVED the world. Who would have thought it? Ever since Adam ate that forbidden fruit, the world has been nothing but a sinking stink hole and it gets worse year by year by year. Just look in the newspaper, watch a TV show or a movie advertisement, even commercials, and you'll see it – Rottenness, Sin, Corruption, Guilt, Perversion – things that we could not even have imagined a few years ago. And God loved THAT world? Who would have thought it? And you and I are part of that world that he loved. We still have the crushing weight of our sin and shame. We still have our petty little arguments and quarrels. We still have our greed and envy. We still have the memory of sins that bring us shame. We still have our pet sins that we hang on to and keep making excuses for. And God loved that? Who would have thought it?

But talk is cheap. If you listen to a television or radio talk show or some blog, many conclude by saying that they love us. I'm sure that Oprah, Dr. Phil and Dr. Oz and Good Morning America and others say they love you. But talk is cheap. Ask them for \$20 and see what that gets you. Visit their house when you need a place to stay or a meal. See if they'll open their house to you. God says that he loved the world...well, talk is cheap. How much does he love us? Jesus told Nicodemus that God loved so much that he GAVE. Gave what? What is he going to give us? A beautiful spring day? Health? Wealth? Food? A roof over our house and plenty of clothes? Family and friends? That would be much more than any of us deserve for all of our sin and guilt. All we deserve is everlasting hell. If those are the only things God gave us, we would still have plenty of reason to get down on our knees and thank him. But that's not what Jesus said. He mentions something so vastly superior that our mortal minds will never fully grasp it.

Jesus says that God so loved the world this way, **that he gave his one and only Son**. Who would have thought it? Gasp in amazement. God gave up his one and only Son. If you had 10 sons, you would not give one of them up to death for your neighbor or a friend. God's love is not a feeling. It's a resolve to rescue you. It's a resolve which led Jesus to the cross where he paid for each and every sin – past, present and future. God's anger over sin was vented on Jesus as he hung on the cross so God won't vent on you. Your sins are already forgiven. You have already been. Heaven is already yours.

God gave his one and only Son, that whoever – that's individual, each one – believes. Not, whoever comes to church often enough, or dresses nice enough at

church, or gives enough money to the church, or helps with the ministry, or does kind and loving things for friends and family and causes in the community, or tries to do good things, or has a kind heart that would like to do good things, or anything else. Whoever believes – simple trust in the heart, like a child trusts mommy and daddy to feed him. But not just belief in anything – like the goodness of mankind, or the spirit of love, or Buddha, or Allah, or Confucius, or a politician or government program, or anything else. **“Whoever believes IN HIM,”** in Jesus, God in the flesh who was talking to Nicodemus.

“Whoever believes in him shall not perish.” Perish does not mean to suffer annihilation, like a candle in the wind getting blown out. It means total and eternal rejection by God, the opposite of being saved, having your dirty deeds exposed and condemned. Instead of perishing, the believer will **“have eternal life.”** Ah, Nicodemus finally had his answer. He could be sure of being in God's kingdom and being saved because God gave him his Son and the Holy Spirit gave Nicodemus faith. Salvation did not depend on him. It depended on God and so he could be sure. Nicodemus must have felt as if the gates of heaven opened, the sun shined, the angels sang and God reached out to hug him. Oh, what joy!

What was true for Nicodemus, is true for you, as an individual. Other people might not care about you or ever help you. There are many who have said hurtful things to you and hold grudges against you. People have mistreated you and taken advantage of you – sometimes even family and friends. There are more than a few times that life feels frustrating and confusing and unfair. Still, you can smile through your tears and broken heart to know that God, the maker and ruler of the universe, loves you as an individual. If you were the only sinner, Jesus would still have died. Jesus was willing to die for you. Put your own name in place of “the world.” “For God so loved _____ (you).” Smile and sing to yourself, “God loves me dearly, loves even me.” God so loved YOU! Amen.

Whoever believes, but it's not just believing. It's believing IN HIM.

Perish = not suffer annihilation, but denotes instead total and eternal rejection by God, it is further defined as the opposite of being saved, as being condemned and as having one's deeds exposed.

If God's goal was simply to condemn the world, he would not have sent Jesus. he could have just destroyed it in any way he wanted. Sending/giving his Son was entirely an act of selfless love.

Many Jews thought that the Messiah would come to condemn the heathen and save the Jews. Wrong. He came to save all people of the world.

This dialogue forces us to deal with the important matters of repentance, regeneration and salvation. our relationship with the Lord

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

John 3:1-17

¹ Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." ³ Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." ⁴ "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' 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." ⁹ "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. ¹⁰ "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—

the Son of Man. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him." ¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Nicodemus – not every Pharisee was part of the Sanhedrin. He was a respected and powerful fellow

Start with law

:3 – Jesus reply seems like he wasn't paying attention to n's question. In reality, he cut quickly to the substance of his message for n and told him what he needed to hear.

In order to be God's kingdom, there needs to be a huge change. A restart. A re-birth. No work righteousness will work.

Gs kingdom is God's rule of grace in our hearts.

:4 – Nicodemus understands that Jesus has some other kind of birth in mind. Nicodemus is actually asking how such a birth can take place. he is looking for an explanation of what Jesus has just said.

Getting into the kingdom was something that happened to you.

Water and spirit go together as a set. Obvious reference to baptism

"flesh" includes the soul, the seat of sin. If it is to be regenerated, flesh must be acted on by the Holy Spirit which happens in baptism.

Jesus uses illustration of wind, spirit, breath

The believer knows the Holy Spirit has been at work in him by the very fact that he believes.

We can understand the working of God's Spirit as little as we can predict the wind blowing on us. ... everyone born of the Spirit cannot fully understand how God in his wisdom sends the Spirit. They just know he does.

Forward in Christ article = rabid atheist is converted.

:7 – you must be born again = plural

We speak of what we know. We = Jesus, John the Baptizer as well as all Old Testament prophets.

:12 –

Jesus is still in heaven forever united in essence with the Father and the Holy Spirit

:13 – only Jesus can explain and execute the plan because he only came from heaven.

Jesus uses illustration of bronze snake

:15 – everyone who believes. Singular. YOU

:16 – God LOVED the world. Emphatic position.

Imagine you had never heard this passage before. How surprising. Smear Deutschlander.

LOVE which understands how wicked and helpless mankind is but still is determined to rescue mankind.

Agape love is not a feeling. It's a resolve.

Whoever believes, but it's not just believing. It's believing IN HIM.

Perish = not suffer annihilation, but denotes instead total and eternal rejection by God, it is further defined as the opposite of being saved, as being condemned and as having one's deeds exposed.

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Sending/giving his Son was entirely an act of selfless love.

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^a3:2 Although Nicodemus wanted to know more about Jesus, he did not want his interest in Jesus to be known publicly, so he came at night. Later, Nicodemus spoke up for Jesus (7:50-51) and came to help prepare Jesus' body for burial (19:39).

^b3:3 Or *born again*. The Greek word *anothen* can have the meaning *from above, from heaven* (see 3:31). It can also have a more temporal sense, *again*. It is difficult to express both senses in one English word so it is difficult to preserve the play on words. Nicodemus misunderstands Jesus' statement as a reference only to another physical birth, like the one he had already received from his mother. Jesus' comments make it clear that he is referring to a birth which is both a second birth (*born again or born anew*) and a birth that has a different quality (*born from above, that is, from heaven*).

^c3:5 In baptism water is applied outwardly and visibly, while the unseen Holy Spirit (3:8) creates faith inwardly (Titus 3:5).

^d3:6 The contrast of *flesh* and *spirit* elsewhere in Scripture (for example, Galatians 5:16-17) suggests that the term *flesh* here refers to the inherited sinful nature (Psalm 51:5) and the term *spirit* refers to the new nature (Ephesians 4:24) created in us by the Holy Spirit when he creates faith in our hearts.

^e3:7 *You* is plural here.

^f3:7 Or *born again*. See the note on verse 3.

^g3:11 Jesus is referring to the Jewish ruling council, of which Nicodemus was a member (3:1) and which bitterly opposed Jesus throughout his ministry.

^h3:13 A few witnesses to the text omit the words *who is in heaven*. These words in the text, *who is in heaven*, are a striking statement of Jesus' divine nature. As the omnipresent God, he is in heaven.

ⁱ3:14 Just as the people who looked at the bronze snake with faith in God's promise were healed and lived (Numbers 21:8-9), so also all who look with faith to Jesus on the cross are forgiven and have eternal life. A serpent or snake was generally associated with something cursed by God (Genesis 3:14), as was anyone hung upon a tree (Deuteronomy 21:23 & Galatians 3:13). The divine irony is that we are saved by looking to one that was cursed in our place (Galatians 3:13-14).

^j3:15 A few witnesses to the text omit the words *not perish but*.

^k3:16 The Greek construction translated *so loved* expresses the great depth and intensity of God's love that moved him to give the greatest gift: his Son. God loved the world so much that he gave his Son to be our Savior. Others explain that the expression shows the manner of God's love, that God showed his love "in this way," by giving his Son.

^l3:16 The expression translated *only-begotten Son* means either that Jesus is the only one of his kind, *the one and only* (Luke 9:38), or that he has a unique, unchanging relationship of oneness that existed between the Father and the Son from eternity (John 1:18; 14:11; Hebrews 1:5). This second nuance is also reflected in the wording of the Nicene Creed which says that Christ is "begotten of the Father from eternity." See FAQ 26 on the Wartburg Project website about the translation of *only-begotten*.

John 3:16 might be the best known passage in the Bible. The EHV translation aims to sound very familiar in well-known passages that many people have memorized. Here is the EHV translation of John 3:16:

16For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

The EHV uses “only-begotten” five times in the New Testament. It is, of course, in [John 3:16](#) (above) as well as in four other related passages: [John 1:14,18](#); [3:18](#); and [1 John 4:9](#).

We did not base our decision to use “only-begotten” on etymology (whether it comes from the stem *genn-* or *gen-*). Instead we focused on how the New Testament uses the Greek term *μονογενής* (*monogenes*) in each context. We do not believe that “only-begotten” is the only option for translating *μονογενής* (*monogenes*). We are not criticizing other translations that don’t use “only-begotten.” Yet, in examining how this term is used in each context, we find “only-begotten” to be an appropriate translation in some cases, particularly in the inspired writings of John.

The Greek term *μονογενής* (*monogenes*) essentially means “only” in the sense of “unique” or “one of a kind.” The context must reveal what makes the person referred to unique. For example, in [John 3:16](#), what is it that makes Jesus unique? It seems that the uniqueness here is in his being God’s only-begotten Son. No one else is God’s only-begotten Son. That is true only of Jesus. Consider [Hebrews 1:5](#): “For to which of the angels did God ever say: ‘You are my Son. Today I have begotten you?’” (EHV; see [Psalm 2:7](#)).

Angels are, in fact, called “sons of God” in [Job 1:6](#). They are sons by creation, but they are not begotten. We are all children of God by creation, but we lost the rights of heirs through the fall. We believers are now children of God and heirs again through faith in Christ Jesus. [Galatians 3:26](#) says, “In fact, you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (EHV).

But Jesus is unique. The eternal begetting of the Son makes Jesus unique. He is the only one who is the Son of God on the basis of an eternal divine nature. In the Nicene Creed, we confess the truth that Jesus Christ is the only Son of God who is “eternally begotten of the Father” (Christian Worship) or “begotten of His Father before all worlds” (Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions). He is “begotten, not made.”

God’s Word to the Nations (a translation of the New Testament) consistently used “only” for *μονογενής* (*monogenes*) in the text of the translation. This 1988 book also offered a very balanced presentation of *μονογενής* (*monogenes*) in Appendix 6 in the back of the book (pages 542-544). This presentation concluded that “in John’s Gospel where it is used of Jesus... it could mean ‘the only-existing’ (‘the only-one-there-is’ or ‘one-of-a-kind’), or... it could have the special meaning of ‘only-begotten’” (p. 544).

Kittel’s ten volume Theological Dictionary of the New Testament states: “In Jn. *μονογενής* denotes the origin of Jesus. He is *μονογενής* as the only-begotten... *μονογενής* probably includes also begetting by God” (vol. 4, p. 741). Many other translations have used “only-begotten” as well, including KJV, NKJV, and NASB. So, we are not breaking any new ground here. We are making use of an old and familiar translation.

This familiar translation appears regularly in Christian worship. In the liturgical song called the Gloria of the Common Service, believers sing, “O Lord, the only begotten Son, Jesus Christ.” In Martin Luther’s hymn, “All Glory Be to God Alone” (translated by W. Gustave Polack), Jesus is praised with these words: “O

Lord, the Sole-begotten One, Lord Jesus Christ, the Father’s Son.” As already mentioned, it appears in the Nicene Creed. At Christmas, many Christians sing, “Of the Father’s Love Begotten.”

If the word “begotten” is regularly used in worship, confessed in the Nicene Creed, and appears in hymns, it is a “heritage term” worth preserving. Many of us grew up memorizing [John 3:16](#) using “only-begotten” too. At this point, we are not aware of a translation of *monogenes* that is better for this passage. Yet, the Greek term *μονογενής* (*monogenes*) does not always mean “only-begotten” in the sense of referring to an eternal divine nature. Context reveals what is unique. There are different nuances in different contexts. The translation “one and only” is not necessarily the best fit for every context either. Consider, for example, [Hebrews 11:17-18](#). The context is Isaac’s relation to Abraham. Was Isaac really Abraham’s “one and only” or “only-begotten” son? Since Ishmael was already born, that was not really the case. So, here it means that he was the “only” son through whom Abraham’s offspring (the promise of the Savior) would be traced.