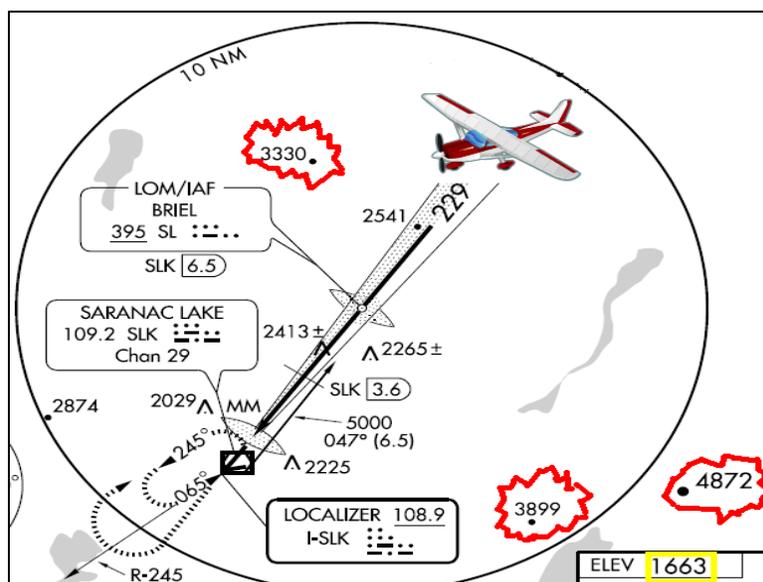


## Where does Spiritual Live Come From? By Jim Hill

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 seem to 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’s answer was, “Well, how could I unless someone guides me? (Acts 8:30-31).” The passage that this Bible lesson will lead us through shows a similar situation for Nicodemus in chapter three of John’s Gospel, a man without a full understanding of the things of God. How could he understand spiritual life except if Jesus explains it to him? *Since spiritual life is a crucially important mystery done completely by God, we must trust in Jesus and not in our own wisdom.*

But before we turn to the text, another illustration from my own life might be helpful in setting 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 as I told my passengers that 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 by now. 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, is what the approach route looked like. That little shaded area is the route inside of which I had to fly. The lens shaped images are electronic radio beacons which 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. If you look closely you may be able to 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 in a long trip in a small plane!

The air traffic controller man had a very gentle, nonchalant voice. **HE** wasn't the one that 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 then 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, very hard, mountains which weren't going to budge if we ran into them?***

I was going to 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, in my instruments and in my flight training. That's what spiritual life is about, trusting and believing in Jesus Christ, and not in 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—<sup>9</sup> 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.

Be honest with me now, can you really understand spiritual life and being born again? Even if you are able to provide some descriptions of people who seem to have spiritual life verses people who don't, it still does not explain where it comes from and how it works. 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 done completely by God, we must trust in Jesus and not in 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 for me was that I was shepherding my friends in 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 are going to 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 in order to keep him from proverbially "slamming into a mountain" along with his friends.

Let's read the Bible in John chapter three.

<sup>1</sup> There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> 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."

<sup>3</sup> Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

<sup>4</sup> 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?"

<sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup> That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' <sup>8</sup> 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."

<sup>9</sup> Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?"

<sup>10</sup> Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? <sup>11</sup> Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. <sup>12</sup> 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 since spiritual life is a crucially important mystery done completely by God, we must trust in Jesus for eternal life and not in ourselves. We must hear this as good news, for we know that all of our strivings have failed to earn us the right to be called God's children.<sup>1</sup> 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 yet, 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 great 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 that he was one of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court. This shows Nick's great initiative, since he was a very public figure and even meeting with Jesus at night brought with it elements of danger had 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 seek him. For most of us, the hard knocks of life force this type of 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 out spiritual answers to life's deepest 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 in my life there was a time when I was leaving a mechanical engineering job in automotive plastics and going to work running a consulting company with my brother. I distinctly remember getting down on my knees and praying to God to ask him 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 to me in my past, through miracles and people that you have sent my way."

Going back 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 is using 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 for a moment 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 the Gospel and act on it.* 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 himself 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 if we think about it further, it actually is good news, 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 own standards of being good, let alone God's. So the mystery of spiritual life can actually be "good news" if we come to the end of ourselves and our own failed efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> "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).

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 certain word in the original text which meant both “again” and “from above.” From the context we can clearly see that Jesus meant you must be born “from above,” referring to a 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 gave an illustration using something that 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 just have to trust. We can't see the wind but we 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 we can pick an apple off of a tree! We have to trust. In verse 12 we see the word “believe” twice. Jesus is accusing Nicodemus, and by extension all of the Jews, of unbelief. Jesus is saying that you must believe in order to receive this spiritual life.

Looking back to that that night that 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, we couldn't control it, we couldn't calm it. This was the illustration that Jesus used in order to explain to Nicodemus the nature of spiritual life. Like the wind, he couldn't see it, it was mysterious. We have to trust Jesus that like the wind, spiritual life is real even though we can't see it or control it. Spiritual life is a mystery, we can't figure it out we just have to trust.

Third and finally, another spiritual principle emerges from the text. Spiritual life is done completely by God, therefore we need to 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 on purpose, knowing that to be born again was a birth that came *only* from above. Spiritual birth is completely 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 this was done by the Holy Spirit. 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 the simple illustrations I used 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 certain teaching from the Old Testament, in Ezekiel 36:

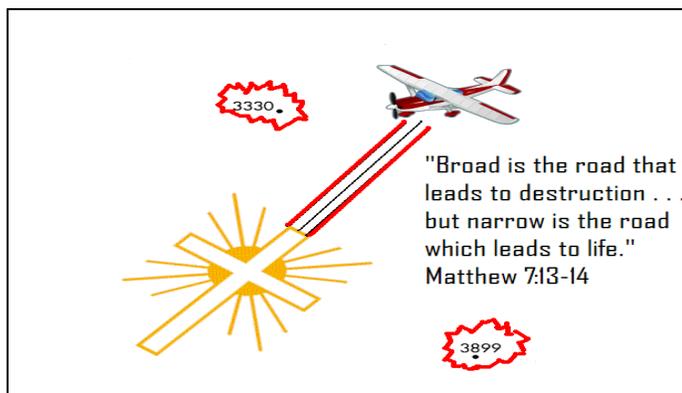
*Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 I will put My Spirit 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 have to depend upon *God*! Spiritual life is done completely by God, therefore depend on Him for your future.

I recently watched a video called “Man in a Hole.” [Click here to watch or browse to http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEpoHO\\_Ox6A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEpoHO_Ox6A) 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 options of escape by enlightened ones fortunate enough to be at the top of the chasm. At one point he was told that he would escape by being a good person, eventually finding Nirvana. Another one told him to pray five times facing east. At the conclusion of the video our lonesome, lost soul is offered *real* hope by a person that offered to descend down into the world himself in order 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 own bootstraps by being a good person 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 in order to rescue us from the “hole” that we are in.

Our text said that we must be born again, spiritually, 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 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 now Jesus is in charge and we surrender to his will in our lives. If we were already a pretty good person before, our outward life might not change that drastically. But the inward motivation for our goodness now comes because Jesus is living inside us. We want to live the life He has 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.<sup>3</sup>

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



<sup>2</sup> “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).

<sup>3</sup> “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).

The approach to the airport between the dangerous mountains was a very narrow way. Jesus said in the Gospel of Matthew, “Broad is the road that leads to destruction, and there are many who go by it. But narrow is the road which leads to life, and there are few who find it.” Some do not like the “narrowness” of Jesus’ teaching. They think that there are many roads to lead to God. They want everyone’s opinions to be right. But if there is true 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.<sup>4</sup> There are a lot of mountains out there to run into along the broad road. But trusting in Jesus for salvation is the narrow road of 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 to recognize the free gift of salvation through Christ as good news and ask 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, that 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 would like 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 know that I have broken your laws and my sins have separated me from you. I am truly sorry, and now I want to turn away from my past sinful life and turn toward you. I believe that your son, Jesus Christ died for my sins, was resurrected from the dead, is alive, and hears my prayer. I invite 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.*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> John 14:6

<sup>5</sup> Source: <http://www.sinner-prayer.com/>