

3-12-17

What Is Eternal Life John 3:1-17

John 3, especially John 3:16, is probably the most well-known scripture passage for Christians in this country: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' A beautiful summation of the Good News of Jesus. But it is a bit earlier in the passage that we get to the how of this - what it means to believe: The very first thing Jesus says to Nicodemus is 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' or as many versions translate it: "born again." The Greek word can mean either, "again" or "from above." A bit confusing. But no matter which translation we choose, it gets at the heart of what it means to believe.

First, though, we must admit that we have confused that word, believe with a similar but very different word: beliefs. There are Christians who will start with John 3:16 and then tell you that you must agree to a certain set of beliefs in order to believe. But Jesus never talks about belief or faith in terms of ideas or beliefs. Even in John's Gospel, written at least 7 decades after Jesus, there is no creed or set of beliefs listed by Jesus. Belief in God is not an intellectual exercise. It does not start in our heads, but in our hearts. In Matthew's Gospel a disciple asks Jesus, "which commandment..is the greatest?" Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' Belief in God for Jesus is about love. Love God with your heart and soul and mind. Love not adhere to this set of beliefs in your mind, it is much deeper and more mysterious and easier. When Jesus talks about being born from above or born again he is talking about waking up spiritually, in Eastern Religion it is called becoming enlightened. Jesus tells Nicodemus and us that in order to see the Kingdom of God... in order to truly see - we must open our eyes, because it is here all around us, in love and grace and beauty and abundance. Belief starts with awareness, moves to gratitude and ends in love- showing we love God by loving our neighbor and living love with our whole being. Once we believe, then we can use our minds to argue about what it means to love God and our neighbor, but we don't start with our mind alone. We open ourselves to a spiritual experience, but we cannot codify it or tell others how they need to have it. We, like the writer of Ephesians can only encourage each other by saying: "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you. Belief = awareness, gratitude and love

And what is the reward for believing in God? Eternal Life. Eternal life, but what exactly did Jesus mean by that? This week's AARP Bulletin cover has this headline. Live Longer! 50 proven ways to add years to your life..... This gives us a clear clue how we as culture see eternal life. Our assumption about the quest for longer, ever eternal life is that it is about quantity of life. Now, certainly when Jesus talks about eternal life, he has that in mind as well - longevity to the Max. But that is not all he had in mind. What if I told you that Jesus saw eternal life not only as adding years to your life, but also as adding life to your years. In The Message version of John 10:10 Jesus says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Abundantly is another ambiguous Greek word meaning both quantity and quality. This is clear in The Message version: "I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of."

For Jesus, eternal life was not just some "Pie in the Sky" future, but it begins now with becoming awake. Biblical Scholar Gail O'nay says that in the Gospel of John "God is fully revealed in Jesus. One does not have to wait for a future revealing of the fullness of God's Glory and God's will in the world or for eternal life. Both are available now in Jesus." And she goes on to quote John 5:24: "Very Truly I tell you anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life." notice Jesus does not say will have, but uses the present tense. "has eternal life." Professor O'Day makes us understand that eternal life starts today by citing John 17 where Jesus says, "this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

One of the reasons we get confused about this is how we hear the words "the Kingdom of God" or "The Kingdom of Heaven." When we hear those words we picture a time in the future when we are gathered at God's throne as pictured in the Revelation of John. But Commentators tell us that when Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God or heaven, he is talking about a present reality that he is trying to bring to the earth. That is why in the Lord's prayer he says, "thy will be done on earth" - here now - "as it is" there now and forever - "in heaven." With this understanding we hear the first thing Jesus says to Nicodemus a bit differently. 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God' - the present reality of God's love around us - 'without being born from above.' We might think of it like changing our citizenship - we shift our allegiance to a different government a whole different nation: The Kingdom of Heaven under the Government of God who reigns with love and justice. Maybe that is what it means to be born from above. And maybe like Jesus we are called to be

Ambassadors from that place to this place. We do not come as conquerers. God never comes with violence, never imposes commands, but God offers, and we offer a new way of living, a new kind of kindness, we offer eternal life, here and now in this place. The ways of God's realm are transferable. The Light of God can shatter any darkness

Retired Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright says, "The work of salvation, in its full sense, is (1) about whole human beings, not merely souls; (2) about the present, not simply the future; and (3) about what God does through us, not merely what God does in and for us." As we seek to tune-up our spiritual lives this Lent his words suggest we ask ourselves: Are my eyes open? Am I aware of the realm of God around me: in the beauty, in the wonder, in the grace, in the love? Am I believing in God enough to see it? Do I need to adjust my vision, or re-position my heart? Am I showing my belief in God by loving God, my neighbor and myself? And finally, are we being good Ambassadors for the Christ. Are we representing Heaven well? Can people get a glimpse of heaven when they look in our eyes?

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.