

Eternal Life
ReCatechism Pascha 2010
Tim Prattas

When we think of Bible verses, the one that even an atheist can usually bring to mind is the one found not only in Bibles, but also in arenas, on t-shirts, on the internet and just about everywhere else. **John 3:16** is quoted in the Orthodox lectionary on a couple of occasions throughout the year, so we might not be that familiar with it. Yet, this quote is something that many Protestants know inside-out. The words are transformational: **“For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life”**.

Although quoted billions of times by so many Christians, a negative thing many Christians do is quote a verse and then forget its context. The context of this passage is the basis for our final *Re-Catechism* discussion on **Life: Both Here and Eternal**.

Out of all the Gospels, St. John the Evangelist is – by far – the most “theological” and truly different than the other three (the so-called “Synoptic” gospels). Although he was persecuted and banished to the island of Patmos, St. John the Evangelist was blessed by God to write not only this Gospel, but also 3 letters (or epistles) and the Apocalypse. His quoting of Christ decades after the death of his Master is uncanny, as he probably wrote this (with the help of a scribe) at about the end of the first century (around 90 – 100 AD). The man the Orthodox Church dubbed “the river of theology” will help us understand all about life...through a short passage (21 verses, to be exact).

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night....

We know that Nicodemus was “a member of the Jewish ruling council”, a person of faith. His colleagues decided to throw stones at Jesus – both figuratively and literally. They had already created a picture in their

minds of whom “the Messiah” would be, of what he would represent and how he would act. They saw Jesus and said, “this ain’t right”, so they said forget it. “Life wasn’t good, but it wouldn’t get better with Jesus,” they thought. For the elders, the Scribes and Pharisees, life was about keeping the balance between the Romans (who were thirsty for world domination) and their own people, the Jews (most of who wanted freedom from their pagan oppressors). One of them even suggested it would be okay if Jesus would die, because one Person’s death would be better than a nation to be lost.

Nicodemus’ colleagues, although brute and uncivilized to the naked eye, remind us a lot of humanity and its view of life. Many have the nice car, the nice-looking house or apartment, the good job, an occasional chocolate or two and then are satisfied with what they have. Even the classic Greek phrase «να έχω υγεία» (*as long as I have my health*) is as old as the marbles of the Parthenon, with people suggesting a “good life” (το «ευ ζήν») is the important thing while we live on this earth.

Yet, Nicodemus was different from all his colleagues. He saw not only the opportunity in a single situation, but the greater picture in this Person he had just met. He knew Jesus was different – and he even went during the evening, with no car or taxicab to take him, to find the Man who would change his life forever. Nicodemus didn’t want a “good life”. Nicodemus wanted eternal life – like the countless Saints (Old Testament, New Testament and onwards) who are honoured by the Orthodox Church each day, each week, every year.

When he finds Jesus, it’s more than just “hey, I found Waldo on some map.” It is a golden opportunity to answer the question *some* people think gets answered at death (although, for us Christians, we know it gets answered much faster than that): *what is the meaning of life?*

Nicodemus continues:

He came to Jesus in the night and said, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

In one statement, Nicodemus did what so many of us in life cannot do: *crush our egos*.

Life here is difficult and we know this. Life on earth brings us interesting characters: an irate boss, lazy employees, indifferent co-workers, a spouse that we sometimes get into “wonderful conversations” with, kids that drive us crazy. Yup, let’s face it: life is difficult. In the midst of this difficulty, we sometimes like to applaud ourselves individually as if we did it all on our own. Nicodemus realized that the help *he* was getting at that time – i.e. putting people he was ministering to on the path to salvation – was due to this Person he was meeting with. A “thank you” was necessary – a “thank you” we forget to say so many times to not only God, but to the people around us that help us. I’d be a hypocrite if I didn’t say “thank you” now to the organizers of this wonderful *Re-Catechism*: Fr. Kosta, John, Fotini and Chrysostom all made this a wonderful reality for us this year. Our thanks go to them and, of course, to our Lord who blessed us and gave us each other and made us into a small family.

At the same time, it was not only a “thank you”, but a declaration that God was with Jesus Christ – a sign that Jesus is not just a “regular human being”. It was the beginning of us seeing that life is not just about the ‘here and now’ but about the things to come. Jesus does not disappoint with His next statement.

In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

And Nicodemus asks the question we all want to ask now:

“How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!”

It’s so true what Nicodemus says. It kind of reminds me of that song, «Ὡρέ να ‘σαν τα νιάτα δυο φορές, τα γερατειά καμία» (“I wish youth was twice, and becoming elderly never happened”). Our minds think of life on earth in intervals: we have infancy,

with good times relaxing in our cribs; childhood, with school, teeth and hockey to worry about; adolescence, with its promise of the “second individualization” going on (finding out ‘who am I and who are my people’); adulthood, complete with university/college, relationships, and PTA meetings); and the elderly stage, where the ‘final steps’ take place.

And that, my friends, is our problem. We say that we are people who are Christians. We all say that, but we all think like people who aren’t Christians. In a sharp contrast, Christians of the first centuries (back when lions would eat them and soldiers would cut their heads off) wouldn’t care about all those things. They’d divide their life into two main stages: time *before Christ came into their lives* and *their conversion onwards*.

Jesus tells Nicodemus: *“I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.*

Now, Jesus isn’t saying that owning a laptop and watching the Habs in the playoffs are tickets to “the land below” – the heresy of **Gnosticism**, which instructed its people to not care for “earthly things” and only focus on “the heavenly things”. We still need to know where we’re going to obtain that food to eat and that water to drink; however, it is quite another to only care if we win the Lotto 6/49 and not care for “the more excellent things.” (cf. 1 Cor. 12)

Jesus continues:

You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ 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.

“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things?”

That phrase “you should not be surprised,” is so important for me as I read it. No one should be “surprised” with things relating to their Faith, and yet we usually are. Nicodemus shouldn’t have been surprised, because he was supposed to be *teaching* the people about the faith and telling them Who to look for when the Messiah would arrive at that time!

At the end of that exchange said above, Jesus even told Nicodemus: “You are Israel’s teacher and do you not understand these things?” We are Christians – the New Israel, the ones who possess Truth Himself: did we make an effort to learn?

For us at *Re-Catechism*: all of us are trying to do something about the “surprise factor” when it comes to Faith, and that’s why we are all either starting to learn more about our Faith or, for others, continuing our journey. Yet, how many – indeed, **how many** – of our fellow “Orthodox Christians” are the C-and-E Christians of the world, sitting back and believing the Holy Communion they received through the ‘drive-thru’ was enough for them to be ‘good Christians’ until Christmas? The same quote of Metropolitan Niketas of the Dardanelles I used in my previous presentation I’ll say again: “we usually shut the door to Jehovah’s Witnesses not because we can’t be bothered with them, but because we can’t answer their questions.” Is it my place to judge? Obviously not. But, am I making a pretty good observation? I’d think so. Just ask any of them to recite the Lord’s Prayer and tell you what it means – it’s more than enough proof.

Jesus continues:

I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?

The Church preaches on life issues – such as the death penalty, abortion, homelessness, etc. – and so many people do not listen because we choose to close our ears (we are interested in the εὐ ζήν, remember). No wonder Jesus asks us, “how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?”

No wonder it's hard for us to stay firm in our faith when it is tested, in any way, shape or form.

Now, no one said it is easy to be a Christian. But, as we'll see in the following verses, Jesus is there to help us when we do fall. All of us need to realize that Jesus will not only give us eternal life in Heaven, but that His relationship with us starts here and now. Here is the "meat" of the passage:

No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

The Israelites were dying in the wilderness because they were getting bit by snakes. So, God said for Moses to put up a bronze serpent on a staff (hey, that kinda looks like a Cross, eh? ;) If they would see the serpent when they were bit, they would be saved. The Cross of Christ gave people eternal life, because Life Himself came to earth, crushed death by His death and gave life to everyone – both those alive and those who had died. For the non-Christian, life means different things; for the Christian, though, life is all centered around the God-Man, with St. Paul's words being so relevant – "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." (Gal. 2:20) Life is worth living – both here and in the next life.

Here's where it gets interesting:

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But

whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.

God is not there to condemn anyone. He wants “all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the Truth.”(1 Tim. 2:4) Yet, that is the beauty of God’s love for us: He tells us that we are free – free to make the choices we want to. Yet, He also tells us some eternal truths in this passage. Life, both here and eternal, is dependent if we all accept Life Himself. If we don’t, Jesus doesn’t like to sugar-coat things: it’s either we accept the light, or we accept darkness. *Re-Catechism* here is to guide us all from death to life, from the earth to heaven, from darkness to light.

Nicodemus wanted eternal life, and now he’s St. Nicodemus. Never think you can’t go for the gold medal, and not the silver medal, in your quest for eternal life. Hey, that’s why Jesus died and rose from the dead: for us to have «αιώνια ζωή και μέγα έλεος» (‘eternal life and great mercy’).