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The conversation began one fall evening while taking a walk with my then six-year-old son. “Daddy, how do I know God is real? I’ve never seen God, so how do I know he exists?”

“That’s a very good question, but it’s hard to explain,” I said, pausing a bit longer to ponder his question. I replied with another question, “Can you see the wind?”

“No,” he explained laughingly, “The wind is invisible. No one can see the wind, Daddy!”

“How do you know it exists?” I asked.

“I can see what it’s doing,” my son said. “See the trees moving—that’s the wind. Look at those leaves moving around—that’s the wind too!”

“I wonder if that’s how we know God exists,” I said. “We can’t see God, but we can see what God’s Spirit is doing, just like we can’t see the wind but can feel what it’s doing.”

I could see him pondering my response, and after a few moments he exclaimed, “You mean like people helping one another? Or when I’m mad and decide not to hit someone? Is that what God is doing?”

“Yes, those are good examples,” I replied.

“I guess God and the wind are a lot alike,” he suggested, “only the wind is much colder in the winter.”

I’m sure that at one point or another each one of us has faced a difficult question about our faith, such as: *Why does evil exist?* That’s hard to explain.

Why do we have to suffer illness? That’s hard to explain.

Why do innocent people die in natural disasters? That’s hard to explain too, isn’t it?

I’ve heard some people say we shouldn’t ask questions. In their minds, faith means we trust without asking or doubting. In the college religion classes I’ve taught through the years, I’ve heard students tell me the struggles they have faced in the churches they grew up in.

One student said to me after class, “Dr. Cripe, I was afraid to take this class, for my church would not approve of me thinking about the questions we’re discussing in class. But through our discussions, I’m seeing a much bigger picture of God. I may not be able to share this with people in

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my church, but I appreciate you allowing me to ask questions.”

I heard students tell me they no longer participate in religion. When I asked one student why he chose to leave the church, he replied, “I questioned one of the stories in the Bible. It didn’t make sense to me, and when I pointed out my observation, I was told, ‘Don’t ask such questions. Just have faith.’ That’s when I decided to leave the church.”

I’ve discovered that questions and doubts are integral parts of my faith, for it’s in the searching and asking that I find myself drawing closer to God. When I struggle with my understanding of God, my faith grows deeper as I ask difficult questions and search to understand. Questions are not the opposite of faith, but a necessary part if our faith is to grow deeper.

I’m not alone with this idea, for the Bible is filled with people who questioned and searched for meaning, beginning in the book of Genesis with Abraham questioning God about the upcoming destruction of the town Sodom. He questioned God,

wondering if the town could be saved if 50 righteous people lived there, then asking to save the town if 40 people were there...then 30...20...10.

Later in the Bible we hear Job argue with his friends who were trying to understand why he was suffering a painful illness, for they suggested that Job or his family must have sinned. Job argued with them while also wondering why he might be suffering, for he knew he had not done anything to deserve such suffering.

And today we encounter in John’s Gospel Nicodemus, a religious leader who had some questions for Jesus. He came to Jesus in the dark of the night, possibly so others didn’t see him asking questions. Have you ever been embarrassed to ask a question? *What will others think of me if I ask such a question? Probably everyone else knows the answer but me, and I don’t want to appear foolish.*

“Excuse me, Rabbi,” said Nicodemus, probably in a whisper, “I have a question for you. We know you are a teacher from God, for no one else could do the wonderful miracles you’re doing without God’s presence.”

Before Nicodemus could even ask a question, Jesus replied, “You’re absolutely right. Take it from me: Unless a person is born from above, it’s not possible to see what I’m pointing to—to God’s kingdom.”¹

I imagine Jesus’ response caught Nicodemus off guard, for he asked, “How can anyone be born who has already been born and grown up? You can’t re-enter your mother’s womb and be born again. What are you saying with this ‘born-from-above’ talk?”²

Jesus could have replied, “Well, that’s hard to explain. Don’t ask such questions.” But instead he explained, “One must be born not only from water, but also by the Spirit.” I imagine Nicodemus had a confused look on his face when hearing Jesus’ response. Jesus seems to hint that just as our mothers give us birth and life through the amniotic waters of the womb, God’s Spirit gives us birth as children of God. In a sense, our first birth comes from our parents, and then we’re born again through God’s Spirit filling our lives. Jesus offered a bit of a warning, however: the Spirit is like the wind—it blows wherever it wants to go. It’s

unpredictable. Random. Sometimes calm. Sometimes turbulent.

We may even wonder at times if we can depend on the Spirit to guide us, as was the case with a minister who had a lot going on one week. The pastor was feeling pressured to do too many things—kids and school activities, church committee meetings, community activities, hospital visits. One week the pastor put off preparing a sermon and thought,

“Perhaps the Holy Spirit will tell me what to say on Sunday morning.” This thought returned to him several times during the week, and when at last he stood silently before his congregation, he turned to the Holy Spirit for guidance, and a celestial voice said to him, “Tell the people you are unprepared!”³

We can’t control God’s Spirit to do what we want, such as calling on the Spirit to fix our last minutes problems.

God’s Spirit can, however, expand our vision from our limited experiences, as was the case with Ruth Barton who grew up in a very conservative church that did not allow women to serve in

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leadership roles. While in college she became certified to teach, and she learned the biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek. She wanted to serve the church, so she began to search the Bible and discovered the examples of women who served as leaders. As she thought about teaching in the church, she was concerned about the scorn she might receive from those in her church and about how her family would react.

Ruth realized that God sometimes offers us risky invitations, opportunities to follow that may feel unpredictable. She always thought following God's Spirit meant going to a foreign mission field. But then she realized that being reborn involves much more. As she claimed her leadership role in

the church and questioned the tradition that formed her, she wrote:

Now I had to grapple with the fact that sometimes following God's risky invitations has to do with challenging ideology or theology that is too small to contain God's truth, breaking with tradition that limits God's expression of the life he wants to live through us.⁴

In other words, ask difficult questions. Struggle with things that don't make sense. Doubt those messages that limit us. Look beyond the narrow theologies that try to limit God. Grow. As Nicodemus discovered, follow the Spirit wherever it blows. Experience a new birth.

¹ John 3:3, *The Message Bible*.

² John 3:4, *The Message Bible*.

³ Hodgins, Michael. *1001 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 4141-4144). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #729 (adapted).

⁴ Ruth Haley Barton, *Longing for More: A Woman's Path to Transformation in Christ*, [p. 76](#).