

# Born to Win

## We Didn't Know

by Ronald L. Dart

Sweet little Jesus Boy,  
They made you be born in a manger.  
Sweet little Holy Child,  
Didn't know who you was.  
Didn't know you'd come to save us, Lord;  
To take our sins away.  
Our eyes was blind, we couldn't see,  
We didn't know who you was.

Long time ago, you was born,  
Born in a manger low,  
Sweet little Jesus Boy.  
The world treat you mean, Lord,  
Treat me mean too,  
But that's how things is down here.  
We don't know who you is.

You done told us how, we is a tryin'!  
Master, you done show'd us how,  
even when you was dyin'.  
Just seem like we can't do right,  
Look how we treated you.  
But please, sir, forgive us, Lord.  
We didn't know 'twas you.

Sweet little Jesus Boy, born long time ago.  
Sweet little Holy Child,  
And we didn't know who you was.

*Robert MacGimsey - Sweet Little Jesus Boy*

### John 1

*AKJV*

- <sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
- <sup>2</sup> The same was in the beginning with God.
- <sup>3</sup> All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.
- <sup>4</sup> In him was life; and the life was the light of men.
- <sup>5</sup> And the light shines in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.
- <sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.
- <sup>7</sup> The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might

believe.

<sup>8</sup> He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.

<sup>9</sup> That was the true Light, which lights every man that comes into the world.

<sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not.

<sup>11</sup> He came to his own, and his own received him not.

<sup>12</sup> But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:

<sup>13</sup> Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

<sup>14</sup> And the Word was made flesh, and dwelled among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

The apostle John was something of a poet. You can tell it by the measured lines of the opening of his gospel—the way he phrases it, the way he puts it together and pieces it together to tell his story. When John finally sat down to write his gospel, he had more material than any scroll or collection of scrolls could *ever* have held. In fact, he closed his gospel by saying this:

### John 21

AKJV

<sup>25</sup> And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. Amen.

And so when this great man decided to open his gospel the way he did, I think it deserves careful attention. He didn't open the way Matthew did, or Mark, or Luke. He began with what I just read you—that whole section: In the beginning was the Word and the Word was *with* God and the Word *was* God and the Word became *flesh* and camped out with us.

I asked Brent to sing the spiritual *Sweet Little Jesus Boy* because it's a favorite of mine. It's a favorite because it carries such a clean, simple version of the gospel; *and* because it is so *beautiful* in the way in which it expresses that gospel. I've long been fascinated by the Negro spiritual and how a semi-literate people—in slavery, really, and *through* the process of slavery—could develop such power and such depth in their music, and such *incredible theology* whenever you take the time to listen and to *think* about what it is that you're hearing.

I think it may be the simplicity that makes the difference. I know the doctrinal purists will quibble over doctrinal lapses here and there that don't quite measure up to whatever their particular doctrine would be. But they miss something *crucial* when they do that: Hardly *any* of those slaves could read or write. They could not sit down with a Bible in their lap and read it. They could not page back and forth through that Bible and search out proof texts. They, in many cases, could only hear the Bible when it was read *to* them, and they heard what preachers would preach to them *from* the Bible.

And they heard all this about Jesus. And Jesus and Moses were *extremely precious* to them. Do you know why? They were both liberators of slaves. That's one of the reasons for the old song *Go Down Moses*:

Go down, Moses  
Way down in Egypt's land  
Tell old Pharaoh  
"Let my people go."

Unknown Author - Go Down Moses

You have to understand: When a song like that comes out of slavery, it takes on special meaning for the people who sing it. They identified with the *lowly* birth of Jesus. He became one of them. It meant something to them that he was born in a barn and laid in a cow's feeding trough. That said something about this one that was there.

They understood something else, I think, that was surprising. They identified *themselves* among those who crucified Jesus. This is a pretty complex theological idea. Did you notice it as you listened to the song? "*We* didn't know who you was. *We* did these things. *Our* eyes was blind. We couldn't see. *We* didn't know it was you."

There is remorse; there is a repentance of the same kind of depth that you read in Daniel's prayer in the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of Daniel—that long and wonderful prayer of that man. And there is no blaming of *anyone else* for what was done. On that case, it was *we*—not *they*—who were responsible.

Just seem like we can't do right,  
Look how we treated you.  
But please, sir, forgive us, Lord.  
We didn't know 'twas you.

*Robert MacGimsey - Sweet Little Jesus Boy*

It's fascinating to me how people, taken as slaves and sold into a nation where the dominant religion was Christian, could see *past* the religion of their masters and identify *so strongly* with Jesus. It's an interesting story how that *possibly* could have ever happened, because you would have thought that they would have said, "Look, these people are Christians. And they're holding us as slaves. I wouldn't want any part of that."

But somebody read the story of Jesus to them. And I think one of the reasons they did identify had to do with the circumstances of Jesus' birth. He was not born in the big house. He wasn't born in one of the master bedrooms, where they have all the nurses and everybody taking care of them. He wasn't laid on satin sheets. He was wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger on some hay, in a stable—with all the smells and sounds of a stable around. (And, of course, those of you who spent much time there may have some fond memories of that.)

The person who composed that spiritual knew something *very important*. He knew that this baby, born and laid in a manger, *came from a different place*. It's right there in the lines of the song. It's implicit, it isn't stated. This is not a doctrinal polemic. He *knew* that that baby came from somewhere else. He was *the Lord* before he came, and *we didn't know that*. What an incredible thing that is.

Didn't know you'd come to save us, Lord;  
To take our sins away.  
[...]  
But please, sir, forgive us, Lord.  
We didn't know 'twas you.

*Robert MacGimsey - Sweet Little Jesus Boy*

How did the man who composed this beautiful, old spiritual know this *this way*? Well, he knew it from the first chapter of John. He'd heard it read—with its *marvelous* rhythms, with the sound that comes along with it and the visions that it brings down. He knew all that. He also didn't believe that the Word descended on Jesus at his baptism. And he didn't believe that Jesus *became* the Word. He believed he *was* the Word, and *that he came*. "It was you. You came. You, Lord, came to save us." The truth was in

John's words, and all the man who wrote that spiritual did was pull them out, think about them long and hard, and sit there (perhaps rocking in a chair) and put that song together. What a genius he was.

**John 1**

AKJV

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

And then there's this simple formula:

**John 1**

ESV

<sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.

Our eyes was blind, we couldn't see,  
We didn't know who you was.

*Robert MacGimsey - Sweet Little Jesus Boy*

I'm not particularly happy with the sophistication that we think we have nowadays. I think we are altogether too sophisticated for our own good. We would serve ourselves better if we could find less *self-esteem* and greater esteem for the Master—who, maybe even to this day, we don't fully know who he is. And perhaps if we could just remember what he said. He said:

**John 13**

AKJV

<sup>16</sup> [...] The servant is not greater than his lord[....]

If Jesus could be born in a manger, if Jesus could be placed *at risk* in the world, if Jesus could be a friend of publicans and sinners, if his great entry into Jerusalem was riding on *a donkey*, maybe we could learn a thing or two ourselves about how we handle ourselves in the world.

The world treat you mean, Lord,  
Treat me mean too,  
But that's how things is down here.  
We don't know who you is.

You done told us how, we is a tryin'!  
Master, you done show'd us how,  
even when you was dyin'.

*Robert MacGimsey - Sweet Little Jesus Boy*

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ID: 05F1