

Lifeblood: The One Thing You Can't Live Without

The Gospel: What We Need

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The Gospel: What We Need John 3:1-21

If you have a Bible, and I hope you do, let me invite you to open with me to John 3. Today may be a very important day, one of the most important days in your life. I say that, not to be dramatic. This Word is too good and too important to be dramatic, but I say that because I believe that the Word has something eternally important to say to many of us. There is nothing new or novel that I want to put in front of you, but at the same time, from the start of our time, I want to ask you to pay close attention to the truths that we are going to see come from John 3.

Last week, we looked at the objective basis of salvation in the gospel. We looked at the gospel telling us that the just and gracious God of the universe looked upon hopelessly, sinful people and sent His Son, Jesus Christ, God in the flesh to bear His wrath against sin on the cross and to show His power over sin in the resurrection, so that all who have faith in Him, will be reconciled to God forever. This is the gospel.

It is the gospel that many people know. The majority of us, I am guessing, know. However, the reality is that knowing, in and of itself, still does not constitute salvation. You can know all of those things and still stand before Jesus one day and hear Him say the words, "I never knew you. Away from me you evildoer." The question still remains, "Okay, how does this gospel become appropriated, become a reality in our lives? How does this gospel become the power of God for salvation in each of our lives?" That is an eternally important question. That is what I want us to dive into, and I want us to hear Jesus' answer to.

We are going to read John 3:1-21. It is a passage that, even if you were in a worship setting today for the first time, you are probably familiar with because it contains John 3:16, which we see in a lot of different places. However, I want you to listen to these verses. Listen to Jesus speaking, almost like you have never heard this story before.

Listen to John 3:1:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at 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 reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" Jesus answered, "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. 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? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still your 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? 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 one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 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.

"I tell you the truth," Jesus said. "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." It is a stout statement, and it begs the question, "Have you been born again?" It almost seems a little antiquated, but there are actually some circles where it is a common term. One example is in the Barna Research Group. You may be familiar with the Barna Research Group. It is a Christian research organization, and they do a lot of surveys to see how many people are Christians or how Christians are living. In fact, if you were to be surveyed by Barna, the first questions you would be asked would be referring to whether or not you were a born again Christian.

Here is how Barna knows if you are a born again Christian. The first question you would be asked is, "Have you ever made a personal commitment to Jesus that is still important in your life today?" You answer "Yes" to that question, and you get a follow-up question. The follow-up question is, "Do you know that you are going to heaven, or do you believe that you are going to heaven?" If you say, "I am going to heaven because I have accepted Jesus", then you are in, you are born again. That is all you need to do. You are now a born again Christian according to Barna. The result is nearly half of Americans...according to Barna, nearly half of Americans are born again Christians. Nearly half of our country is born again.

However, what is interesting is when you probe deeper into Barna's research, you start to find some interesting things. You start to find that the beliefs of born again Christians vary widely. In fact, there is a large number of born again Christians who believe works can get you into heaven. Then, you start going into lifestyles, and you find that "born again Christians," their lives are in many ways virtually indistinguishable from non-Christians. One headline said, "Born again Christians are just as likely to divorce as non-Christians." It goes on to talk about in different studies, how born again Christians listen to and watch the same entertainment as non-Christians. They love material possessions just as much as non-Christians. They respond to injustice in the world the same as non-Christians do. The result is many people have taken what Barna has researched and come to the conclusion that born again Christians really don't look or, in some ways, don't believe very differently from non-Christians.

What I want to propose to you is that that conclusion is wrong. That conclusion is completely invalid. I am not saying that Barna's research is invalid. I am sure they are statistically right on target. What I am saying is I think this research does not show that born again Christians and non-Christians live and believe the same things. I believe that it shows that there are a lot of people who think they are born again Christians who are not. Their lives and their beliefs testify that they are not.

You think about it what it takes to be classified as a born again Christian according to Barna, that you say that you have made a personal commitment to Jesus and believe that you are going to heaven. You believe in Jesus, and you believe you are going to heaven. Neither of those things, in and of themselves, constitute what Scripture teaches about what it means to be born again. You believe in Jesus. Who doesn't? Every intoxicated person I have met on the street believes in Jesus. Unmarried couples, sleeping together, believe in Jesus. Men and women who haven't been to worship in forty years believe in Jesus. Multitudes of world-loving, lukewarm church attenders believe in Jesus. Multitudes of church attenders today believe in Jesus but have never been born again.

What Happens When We Are Born Again?

What I want us to do is I want us to think about what it means to be born again, and I want us to go even beyond and even look right here before John 3. Look with me at John 2:23. Listen to what it says here. I want you to see how it is possible to believe in Jesus but be clueless when it comes to what it means to be born again. Listen to John 2:23, *"Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name."* There it is, they believed. Listen to verse 24, *"But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men."* What an interesting phrase there. A lot of people believing in Jesus, and Jesus doesn't entrust Himself to them.

An illustration we have of that is Nicodemus. He comes on the scene, and you get to verse 2. He knows, he believes that Jesus is from God, but he has no clue as to what it means to be born again. If Jesus says, *"No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again,"* then I think it is an eternally important question to ask, "Have you been born again?" In order to ask that question, we have got to look at what it means to be born again, and so that is what I want us to do. I want us to see in Scripture what the Bible teaches, what God teaches about what happens in the new birth, what happens when we are born again, because this is eternally important, and it definitely goes, obviously, beyond intellectual belief.

This is so huge because we are so accustomed to sitting in a room like this and hearing someone say things and then responding in our hearts or our minds and say, "Yes, I believe that." However, what we have got to realize is you can sit in a room like this every single Sunday of your entire life, ever since you were a kid, and still not have the gospel appropriated in your life for salvation, still not be born again.

So, what is involved in being born again? So, what I want us to look at is what God does in our hearts when we are born again. All the things that we are going to talk about is what God is doing. Now, I am not saying that we don't have any part in this. We are going to get to that, but what I want us to see is that God is the supreme actor in salvation, and God's grace permeates the whole picture of what it means to be born again. Even faith at its core is a gift of grace, and I want us to see this because, well, you have heard me the last few weeks almost hammering in some ways, and you will probably hear it a couple of times

tonight, on praying a prayer, signing a card or walking an aisle. I want to remind you that your faith is not based on a prayer and your faith is not based on a card or a conversation. Your faith is not even based on a decision. Your faith is based on a God whose grace has totally captivated you, transformed your life. We are going to see that unfold.

God reveals our need.

So, what happens when we are born again? I want you to think about it based on John 3 in four different ways. I am not saying these are necessarily sequential...one, two, three, and four. Let's get out of thinking of this whole picture as checking off boxes. Let's see what happens when we are born again. Number one: When we are born again, God reveals our need. You have got to realize that Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a "*member of the Jewish ruling council*", it says at the very beginning. This is a very well respected man. He is a devout man to say the least. He has spent his entire life learning how to enter the kingdom of God. He has spent his entire life teaching others what commands to obey, what actions to take to enter the kingdom of God.

It is what he has spent his life doing which really brings the gravity of what Jesus says in verse 3 to the forefront. For this guy, who is radically devoted to God, to His work, to hear Jesus say, "You have no spiritual life in you whatsoever." In that one statement in verse 3, he undercuts the entire foundation of who Nicodemus is, what Nicodemus is doing with his life. He says, "All of your religion in the end is really meaningless. It is just a cover-up of your isolation from God." Is it possible that our religion today can be a cover-up for our isolation from God? Religion can be the means by which we have our ears tickled week by week by week but mask the fact that we are separated from God, and no matter how hard we try, we cannot get to Him.

That is what Jesus is addressing here. He is revealing Nicodemus' need, and I think He does it in very different ways. I want you to see what He is talking about when He introduces this idea of new birth. What is He saying? Well, first, of all, Jesus is saying the new birth is necessary to know God. You cannot know God apart from new birth, apart from being born again. That is what He is saying. "*No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.*" You get over to verse 7, midway through, and He says, "You must be born again."

Now, He is not just singling out Nicodemus and saying, "Well, this is different from everybody else, but you, in order to enter the kingdom of God, you must be born again." He is saying this to every single one of us in this room. Ladies and gentlemen, in order for any one of us in this room to spend eternity with God, we must be born again. It is not an option. It is the way. You must be born again. The new birth is necessary to know God.

Second, the new birth is impossible without God. As soon as Jesus says that, Nicodemus is almost a little dumbfounded, struck. He responds, "*How can a man be born again when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!*" We find out, obviously, that is not what Jesus is talking about. He is not talking about physically entering into His mother's womb. Obviously, that would be impossible. However, Nicodemus is starting to get a little bit of the point that Jesus is trying to communicate, the fact that you can't do this. It is impossible. It is impossible for you to give birth to yourself, to be born again yourself. It is impossible for you to cause that.

I mean, who really decides to be born? Any of you sitting around one day thinking, "You know, I don't have anything else better going on. I guess I would like to enter earth now." So, you decide to come in. Nobody decides that. You don't decide to be born. This is the picture that Jesus is giving. He is showing Nicodemus that this is impossible for you to do.

This whole idea, this language, "born again" literally means "born from above." He starts talking about the Spirit, which we will get to in a second. However, He starts talking about how this is something that has to happen to you from above. You can't manufacture this. It is impossible without God from above, through His Spirit, giving you life.

This is the picture that we have of salvation all throughout the New Testament. Later at a different point, Matthew 19:26-27, Jesus is talking to His disciples, and they look at Him...it's the rich young ruler passage...and they say "Well, then who can be saved?" Jesus looks back at them, and He says "*With man it is not possible. But with God, all things are possible.*" It is impossible without God; it is possible with God.

In fact, what I want to do is give you just a real quick portrait of what the New Testament tells us...what the Bible tells us about us before we are born again. Before we come to faith in Christ, before we receive salvation, before this gospel was appropriated in our lives, how does the Bible describe us? I am going to kind of fire these off one by one, and I am going to throw out verses left and right. This is kind of Secret Church preparation. If you have got time to write them all down, it is great, but I want you just to hear a biblical portrait of your life...your life apart from being born again, apart from the work of Christ in your life. Here is what Scripture teaches.

Number one: We are morally evil. Now, I know that as soon as I throw that word out there, that kind of strikes us a little bit, because if I were to say, "Well, we are sinful." "Yeah, okay." If I were to say, "We make wrong decisions." "Well, yeah, I do that." However, morally evil? That is taking things a little too far. Well, that is actually how far the Bible takes it. Genesis 8:21, "*Every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood.*" That is pretty clear. Then, you go to the New Testament. Luke 11. Jesus is talking to His disciples in verses 11 through 13 about prayer. He says in verse 13, "*If you then, though you are...*" What? "*...evil.*" "*...though you are evil.*" It is almost like, "We know this, obviously you guys are evil." Jesus just assumes that we realize that we are morally evil even here in this passage.

Look down in John 3:19 and listen to what the Bible says...Jesus is saying, "*This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were...*" What? "*...evil.*" We are morally evil.

Second, we are spiritually sick. Matthew 9:12: We are spiritually sick, and we need a doctor. At the core of who we are, there is terminal, malignant disease that is far deeper and far more weighty than any physical disease that we could ever get. We are spiritually sick at the core of who we are.

Third, we are slaves to sin. John 8:34, "*Everyone who sins,*" Jesus says, "*is a slave to sin.*" Have you sinned? Then, you are a slave to sin. Romans 6:16 and 20 talk about how we are slaves to the sinful nature, gratifying the desires to the sinful nature. 2 Timothy 2:26 says that we are captive to the devil himself. We are slaves to sin.

Next, we are blinded to truth. 1 Corinthians 2:14 says we cannot understand the things of God; they are foolishness to us. The same thing 2 Corinthians 4:4 says, "*The god of this world...*" Little 'g' of this world, talking about the devil, the adversary, "*The god of this world has blinded this world of unbelievers from seeing the light of the gospel.*" Ephesians 4:18 says that our understanding is darkened. It goes on to talk about how we have hearts of stone. We are not receptive to truth. We are blinded to it. Matthew 5:8 says we cannot see God.

Next, we are lovers of darkness. Ephesians 5:8...Ephesians 5:8 says, "*You were once darkness.*" Even in this passage that we just read, John 3:20, "*Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.*" We love the darkness. We run from the light. We love the darkness. You were once darkness, Ephesians tells us. Next, we are children of wrath. James 4:4 and Romans 5:10 both tell us that we are enemies of God, an enemy of God. People say, "Well, I have loved God all of my life." No, you have not. You may have loved a god that you made up in your mind, but the God of the Bible, you hated. Enemies of God. Ephesians 2:1-3 says, literally, that "*we are objects of the wrath of God.*" It is not a good list.

Morally evil, spiritually sick, slaves to sin, we are blinded to truth, lovers of darkness, children of wrath, all culminating in this last one. We are spiritually dead. We are under the sentence of physical death, Romans 5:12; spiritual death, Ephesians 5:14, and eternal death, Romans 6:23. Ephesians 2:1 literally says, "*You were dead in your transgressions.*" So, this is the portrait of us before we were born again, before we come to faith in Christ.

Now, I want you to think about this list with me and let's just ask a very simple question: How is it possible to be morally evil, to have every inclination of your heart evil since childhood...how it is possible, then, for you to choose that which is good? How is it possible for you to become good if you are morally evil? How is it possible for you, who are spiritually sick...how is it possible to make yourself well when you are sick? How is it possible to be a slave to sin and to free yourself from slavery? How is it possible to be blinded to truth and cause yourself to be able to see now? How can you do that? How can you, who are lovers of darkness, who, when you see the light, you run from the light because you love the darkness...how is it possible to turn from the darkness and come to the light and run to the light? How is it possible for you to do that when you hate it? Children of wrath, objects of wrath, how is it possible for you to appease the wrath of God? Spiritually dead, how is it possible for a dead person to cause himself to come to life? The likelihood of that is the same as Lazarus in the tomb deciding, "I would like to start breathing again," and so there he goes.

This is the whole point of what Jesus is showing us in this picture of being born again. This is not something that we can manufacture. This has to happen from above. The Spirit of God has to do this in our lives and apart from the work of God, this is impossible. He is talking about our inability to enter the kingdom of God. I know that this is very hard for us to stomach in a sense, because we are good, moral, American people who take our general understanding of American morality, give it a dose of church attendance and obedience to parts of the Bible, and make sure to avoid some of the things in the world. We put it all together, and we think, "Well, it is certainly not as bad as this sounds." You put, on top of that, we are a do it yourself people, we look at this, almost like Nicodemus in John 3, and we say, "There has got to be something that I can do. There have got to be some boxes that I can check off to take care of this, some kind of rules I can follow to make this happen." Jesus is saying there is not.

I know that this leaves some of us almost as frustrated to the core. "Okay, Dave, why do you keep telling us this? There is nothing that we can do to get to God. Morally evil, slaves to sin, lovers of darkness, we are spiritually dead...I get it. Nothing I can do, and even in my attempts to do that are deceptive, and they are cover ups for my isolation from God." You could almost throw your hands up in the air and say, "Well, what am I supposed to do?"

If that is the case, then I want to encourage you. You are getting to the heart of what it means to be born again. If this frustrates you, brings you to a point of desperation and hopelessness and helplessness spiritually, then that is the point. That is a good thing. If you

don't feel the wrestling with that, if you don't feel the weight of that, if you don't feel the weight of that desperation, then be worried. Be worried because you have bought into what Nicodemus had bought into, and it is a self-sufficient path to God, and it is not possible without Him.

Which leads to this third truth about the new birth: The new birth is necessary to know God, impossible without God and the new birth is dependent on God. Ladies and gentlemen, you cannot be born again apart from a desperation for God in your sin, a realization of your need. Nicodemus asked, "How can this be?" It is the last words we hear from him even in verse 9. "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. The whole point of John 3:1-10, what it is focusing on...it is not...you don't see it in the first part of this passage: "Well, Nicodemus, here is how you can be born again. Do this." Instead, Jesus is focusing on what is done to you; what you need to happen from above, Nicodemus says.

This is part of...don't miss it...this is part of the gospel; it is part of the good news because the reality is the gospel is a picture of God coming to you right where you are. It's not God sitting back and saying, "Let's meet halfway in the middle." He comes right to where we are in our darkness, and He shines His light. He comes to us in our death, and He gives us life. He does this. This is really good news. That God in His mercy and grace would come and meet us where we are to give us birth when there was absolutely nothing we could do.

When you think about how this truth...this is a couple of tangents, but it is worth at least just thinking about it for a couple of seconds. You think about how this truth radically affects our worship. We realize that we gather together in a room like this...we realize that the only reason that any one of us is in the place where we find ourselves right now, singing the songs that we are singing, is because of the grace and mercy of Almighty God. If it were not for Him meeting us right where we are, we would all be spiritually dead and headed to eternal darkness. That gives us great cause to worship. God, help us to realize that.

You think about how this affects missions and evangelism. You think about the hardest heart in the office where you work, the person who is so opposed to the thoughts of God or conversation about God. You think about that person and realize that the power of the Spirit of God can take the hardest heart, meet it where it is and radically transform it for His glory. There is not one person in Birmingham that is beyond the bounds of the power of the Spirit of God. Not one person in the nations. Brook Hills, this is why we go to the Bedouin, this whole people group, most of whom have never even heard the name of Jesus. We can go to a tribe in the Bedouin even though their lives are completely against the gospel. At the moment when we share the gospel with them, it is the power of God for salvation. The Holy Spirit will take that gospel you preach to the Bedouin, and you can know that there are people who God is going to open their eyes and bring them out. It gives great confidence to us.

This is the picture. Being born again happens when God reveals our need. Has God revealed your need for Him? Has He brought you to a place of total desperation? I mentioned last week I am reading the biography of David Brainerd over again...incredible biography. He talks about how, for months and months and months, he struggled, wrestled with God in prayer for hours, and at a time, coming to the point where he realized his need. God shows you your need for Him, brought you to a place of desperation, spiritual helplessness and hopelessness without Him. It is what is involved, what happens when we are born again; we realize that we can't do this.

God changes our hearts.

Second...God reveals our need, and second, God changes our heart. Now, Nicodemus is confused, wondering how this happens, and Jesus, well, it looks like He is kind of clarifying things, but Nicodemus is still confused in verse 9. However, this is what Jesus says to try to clarify. I want you to listen to His words in verse 5. Jesus says, *"I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God..."* He uses that phrase again, *"...unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit."* We are about to talk about this picture of water and Spirit throughout the Old Testament. We are going to see what this picture of water and the Spirit means, but it suffices to say at this point, Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, "Nicodemus, you have spent your entire life trying to reform your life and your character and your beliefs from the outside in, trying to do it all right, get it all right. The reality is you need something to happen in you from the inside out. You need a change of heart."

Now, from the very beginning of even thinking about this, before we dive into the Old Testament, I want you to think about how huge this is because of the way we have so pictured salvation and Christianity today. When we talk about becoming a Christian, coming to faith in Christ, we talk about coming to this point where you do this religious ritual, whether it is praying a prayer or making a decision, this or that, and what we describe salvation as, at that point, what you do is you let go of the things of the world that you love and you reach for the things of God that, if you are really honest, seem laborious to you and don't seem that exciting. They certainly don't seem as exciting as the things of the world do, but you know you have got to do these things in order to save your skin, so you reach for these things. You pray this prayer. You make this decision.

Now, you have got a dilemma. You really still want all of these things, but you are supposed to live according to these things. So, now, you start this process of a supposedly Christian life where you try and you try and you try to like these things of God. You try and you try to like them, but you find yourself not finding any joy in Him. You find yourself running back to these things over here. You end up thinking, "Well, I am living a defeated Christian life, but at least I am saving my skin by trying to get it right."

Ladies and gentlemen, this is not biblical Christianity. What happens in the new birth is God changes your heart. You don't need to improve the old nature. That is not salvation. That is not what the gospel is about. It's not about improving the old nature. It is giving you an entirely new nature. If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. He puts a new heart in you. He transforms your heart so that you begin to love the things of God. He gives you new desires and new longings, new loves, new affections.

I am not saying that this happens all at once, and you never have any desire at all for the things of the world any more. This is, no question, a process, and we will talk more about that next week. However, suffice to say at this point, the point that we are born again, God gives us a new heart. It is not a picture where we have to begrudgingly do these things. It is we want God, and the more we want God, the more we see the beauty of God, and as we grow in this, the more we realize how the things of this world pale in comparison.

Let me show this to you in Ezekiel. Turn back with me to the Old Testament to Ezekiel 36. Ezekiel 36. There are many places in the Bible that talk about this picture of water and the Spirit. This is one of the places where they are back to back. A perfect picture of what John is talking about in John 3. Now, while you are turning there, Ezekiel 36, it may take you a minute to find, we have got to realize that in the Old Testament, water is a picture...it is a symbol of purification in the Old Testament. It is a symbol of being purified of all that defiles you.

Suffice to say, we don't have time to go in depth into this, but John 3 is not talking about baptism. It is not talking about water baptism. It is nowhere in the context. It is not the picture of what is going on in John 3. It is not talking about baptism. I want you to see the picture of water in the Old Testament. You see water and the Spirit. It is the same verse that you heard quoted just a little while ago, Titus 3:3-8, which is an incredible passage. I want to encourage you to hide that passage in your heart. Titus 3:3-8, verse 5, it is talking about the exact same thing that John is illustrating. What Titus 3:5 talks about is how we are saved, not by our righteous works, but by the mercy of God who washes us and renews us by the Holy Spirit. It is the same thing that is going on here...water and Spirit.

Look with me at Ezekiel 36. Look at verse 24. This is God speaking to His people. Listen to what He says. He says, *"For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land."* Listen to verse 25, *"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols."* Have you got the picture? "I will take water, sprinkle clean water on you, and cleanse from all your impurities, from all your idols." This is the picture of what God does when He changes our heart.

Born of water and the Spirit. What does that mean? First of all, it means that He cleanses us. This is a picture of water. He washes us. Titus 3:5 says that He washes us. He cleanses us from all our impurities, from all our sin. This is what happens when He gives us a new heart. He cleanses us from impurities. That is huge. It is very important to have our sin washed away, to be forgiven of our sin, to have it wiped away. That is the picture. He cleanses us. When He gives us a new heart, He cleanses us, but it doesn't stop there.

Remember water and the Spirit? Remember what happens right after this in verse 26. God says, *"I will give you a new heart and put a new..."* What? *"...a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."* What an incredible picture.

When God changes our heart, He cleanses us, number one, and second, He indwells us. He says, "I have put my Spirit in you. I give you a new heart, a new spirit. Not a heart of stone any more, but a heart of flesh that is tender toward me." You get to the rest of this chapter, then Ezekiel 37, which you have got an incredible picture of the Spirit breathing life, and that is the picture that God is giving us here, a new covenant. That's what was happening. That is what salvation is about. He cleanses us and then He indwells us. This is what happens when God changes our heart.

However, here is what I want you to think about with me for a second. I want you to think about how we have so conditioned ourselves to understand salvation as the first part of this, but not the second part of it. Here is what I mean by that. We have so conditioned ourselves to understand salvation as forgiveness of our sins that we almost put a period on it. We say, "Okay, once forgiven, now we can move on with our lives." It is a good thing to be free of it, but we disconnect this picture of water and the Spirit. We disconnect this picture of cleansing and indwelling. As a result, we miss the point of biblical salvation, salvation according to Scripture. When we focus salvation just on that first part, what it means to be forgiven of sins, then what we do is we create this idea that coming to faith in Christ is praying this prayer or doing this deal or making this decision, so that you can be forgiven, and then, we let this idea creep in that now, you can live your life however you want after that.

What we have is a bunch of people who pray a prayer to get forgiveness of sins, but then their lives go on morally evil and spiritually dead; such that we make outlandish statements in the church like, "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven." That is what we tell the world. "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven." Now, I am not saying that we are perfect. I'm not saying that any one of us in this room is perfect. However, do we need to make excuses to the world for why we are not letting the power of Christ radically transform our lives? Why not just say, "Christians aren't moral, just forgiven." "Christians aren't nice, just forgiven." Instead, we create this idea that salvation is about doing this deal, making this decision, and praying this prayer, whatever you want to call it and then after that, you can live just like the rest of the world. The difference between you and non-Christians, though, is when you live like them, you, thankfully, have a "get out of hell free card" in your pocket. This is not the gospel. It is not the gospel at all.

What happens in the new birth is God changes our heart. Yes, He cleanses us, but He also fills us. He puts His very Spirit in each of us, and He begins to change who we are, change our desires so that our lives are going to look differently. This is why, back in John 3, Jesus starts talking about...kind of compares the Spirit...the work of the Spirit to the wind. You don't see the wind. You see the effects of the wind. You see the effects of the Spirit, and I wonder if we have just robbed this picture of salvation of the power of the Spirit of God, and what He does to change our hearts, at that point, when He opens our eyes, when He changes our desires, when He brings us from death to life and sets us on an entirely new course because we have a new heart.

This is one of the reasons why you do hear me talk about praying a prayer at different points. Again, I remind you that I am not saying that praying a prayer of salvation is bad. I am not saying that if you did that your salvation is null and void. It is not what I am saying, but I am saying this idea of, in order to come to faith in Christ, you need a preacher to lead you in a prayer; you need somebody to help close the deal in your heart. That is not true. When the Spirit of God comes upon you and changes your heart, reveals your need to you, changes your heart and cleanses your heart and puts His Spirit in you, the last thing you need at that point is somebody to tell you what to repeat after them.

The Holy Spirit of God is more than sufficient, at that point, to cause your heart, even if you have never prayed once in your life, to begin to cry out to God a prayer for salvation that flows and gushes out of you when the Spirit of God is working in you. God forbid that we would interfere with the work of the Spirit of God and try to get somebody to do what we want them to do in order to make sure that our numbers are straight. This is the work of the Spirit of God and let's look at the Spirit, what the Spirit is doing. Let's rejoice in how the Spirit is showing Himself strong, how the Spirit is filling somebody.

Listen to what He does; listen to this passage in Ezekiel 36. Listen to the emphasis on the first person pronouns. Listen to what God is saying happens. "I will take you out of the nations. I will gather you from all the countries. I will sprinkle clean water on you. I will cleanse you. I will give you a new heart. I will remove from you your heart of stone. I will put my Spirit in you. I will do all of these things, and the result is you will follow me. You will obey my decrees. Be careful to keep my laws, because I am doing this in you, and I am able to change your heart." Has God changed your heart? Has He changed your heart?

I don't want to muddy the waters between how this salvation, life with Christ, is worked out in this point of salvation. We are going to talk about how it is worked out. I am not saying that at this point of salvation, when you are born again, that everything is perfect, and you never have any struggles with sin anymore. However, I am saying this: the Scriptures teach that when you are born of the water and the Spirit that your heart is cleansed and your

heart is renewed. You have a new heart in you. You are a new creation, and the effects of that will begin to show. The work of the Spirit, you will see. Has God given you a new heart?

God enables our belief.

If you are born again, God reveals our need, and He changes our heart. Third, God enables our belief. Now these first ten or eleven verses that we have been talking about in John 3 have been talking about what God does in giving us life and bringing us to be born again...what you see in 10-11 is a shift throughout the rest of this passage that we just read to one key word. That word is "believe." It is mentioned, I think, seven times. It is the same word, idea that we talked about last week: The gospel is what God did, so that all who have faith in Christ will be reconciled to God forever, faith alone. In fact, in Romans 3...the end of Romans 3, and then you get into Romans 4...twenty different times, over twenty times, you see "faith" and "belief" mentioned. Scripture is very clear that this is the means by which the gospel is appropriated in us.

However, we come back to this idea that we have already established though, that belief is more than intellectual acknowledgement to certain truths. That is where I want us to see...this believing, having faith...I want us to see in the context of the whole picture of what it means to be born again. When we are born again, He reveals our need for Him. Something that only He can do to open our eyes; in our moral evil, spiritual deadness, He opens our eyes. He changes our heart. Something only He can do: Sprinkle us, cleanse us and indwell us. The means by which He does this, the means by which this is appropriated, is belief in the gospel, faith in Christ.

So, this is where we see our act in salvation, our believing in the context of God's act in salvation. They go together...don't miss this...they go together all throughout Scripture. People, theologians, many people love to debate, "How much does God do, and how much does man do in salvation?" To be honest, we will hit on this even a little bit in Secret Church, there is a mystery here. Not a contradiction, but a mystery here, to realize that faith, no question, is our act. We believe, and we are held accountable for whether or not we believe. All of us in this room, our eternal destiny hinges on whether or not we believe. We are responsible for that. Nobody can believe for us. We believe or not believe. Faith is our act, but that act takes place within the context of God's acting, within the context of God's grace and God's mercy, and they go together.

"Well," you say, "Preacher, how do they go together?" What happens in salvation is, God in His great sovereignty, performs a miracle in our lives by which the Holy Spirit transforms us and, in no way, says, "Well, I am going to do this, and you are going to do this." This is a picture of God in His great mercy, in His great wisdom, bringing about salvation in a way that shows His glory. What I want you to see, all over Scripture, John 6:44, Jesus says to His disciples, to a whole crowd of people, *"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him."* Then, you get to the book of Acts, and you see how the gospel is advancing. Listen to Acts 16:14. It is talking about Lydia. Acts 16:14 says that *"God opened Lydia's heart to the gospel message."* Incredible phrase. She hears the gospel message, and God opens her heart to it. She responds to the gospel, yes. God opened her heart to the gospel, yes. Acts 11:18 says, that *"God granted Gentiles repentance unto salvation."* God granted them repentance. Repentance in and of itself was a gift from God. Acts 14:27 says, *"God opened the door of faith to the Gentiles."* Acts 15:9 says, *"God purified their hearts."* God did it by faith. So, the picture is faith is the means by which this is appropriated, in the context of all this picture of being born again, in the context of God's grace and mercy.

So, what happens in faith? Very simply, in faith...and it is all based on the context of His grace...by His grace, in faith, number one: We turn from sin. What happens in saving faith

and belief? We turn from sin. It is the whole picture. It is as simple as John 3 gives us here this picture of light and darkness. We loved darkness, but when our eyes were opened, we saw the light. God showed us His beauty and His mercy and His grace through Christ, then we turn from darkness. We don't keep dwelling in darkness. You turn from darkness. That which you used to hate, you now love. We turn from sin.

This is the gospel invitation that is all over, especially at the beginning of Acts, but all over the book of Acts. Acts 2:38, the people ask after Peter preaches the first Christian sermon, "What do we do?" He looks at them, and he says, "*Repent and be baptized.*" Acts 3:19, "*Repent and turn to God.*" Turn from sin.

Second, by His grace, we trust in Christ. We turn from sin, and we trust in Christ. Just like in the Old Testament, this goes back to verses 14 and 15 in John 3, just like the people who were dying of snake bites looked at the serpent on a pole. It was by looking at that serpent on a pole that God brought salvation. They are believing in His provision. Same thing for us. We look to Christ as the only one who can reconcile us to God, the only one who can cleanse us from sin, the only one who can make it possible for us to have a new heart. It all revolves around the gospel. You turn from sin, and you trust in Christ. This is the heart of the gospel. It is Acts 16:31 and Paul and the Philippian jailer, "*Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.*" Trust in Christ, and they both come together in this picture of God enabling our belief. We trust in Christ to reconcile us to God.

So, it begs the question, "Has this belief, has this faith in the context of God's grace, been a reality in your life? Is this turning from sin and trusting in Christ alone to save you a reality in your life? It is part of what happens in the new birth. God reveals our need, He changes our heart and God enables our belief.

God transforms our lives.

All of that leads to this last part of the new birth, and I want to show you, and I want you to follow with me very, very closely. In the new birth, God reveals our need. In the new birth, He changes our heart. In the new birth, He enables our belief. Fourth: In the new birth, God transforms our lives. Now, I want to be careful here because we are going to talk next week about how, what happens at the new birth, begins a process of transformation. I am not saying in any way, as soon as the new birth happens, that everything is right. We talked about that. This is really reiterating some of the things that we have talked about with the Spirit of God in us.

However, I want to show you something at the end of John 3. Listen to verse 21, "*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.*" What a great verse. "*Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light.*" We have been talking about believing. "*Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly what he has done has been done through God.*"

Now, I want to show you two truths here, and then I want you to hone in on a couple of things. Here's what happens when God transforms our lives. Number one, He transforms us for our eternal good. Now, we have already talked about this some, but this is the picture of darkness and light. All throughout the book of John especially, you see this contrast between dark and light. Darkness is that which represents evil, and the light represents that which is good. So, what happens is, you used to love evil, and you used to love darkness, but what happens when you are born again is now you begin to love that which is good. You begin to see that which is good. You begin to experience that which is good. This is the beauty of it.

I mean, you think about it. Before you came to Christ, before you trusted in Christ, before you were born again, you loved food and fellowship and TV and sports and all the things that this world has to offer, and God was over here, and He was a thought. He was an idea, but nothing more than that. Maybe a topic for discussion. What happened is, when God changed your heart, He transformed your life, so that now, you begin to see that He is good, that He is satisfying and He is glorious; He is worthy, and He is all that is good for you. Compared to Him, even the best things that this world has to offer, even the best things begin to fade in comparison. This is the picture of how God transforms our lives for our eternal good to experience the light, to experience He who is good. Our satisfaction is found in Him.

Now, this is the process that we are going to talk about next week where we grow in that, but this is what happens. Transformation happens at the point when we are born again, and we begin to see this, which leads to the second part of this. John 3:21. God transforms our lives for our eternal good, and second, God transforms us for His eternal glory. Did you catch what John 3:21 says? It is a great phrase at the end. *"But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that..."* Here is why, *"...so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through..."* Who? *"...God."* What is God doing in the new birth? He is showing His power. God is showing His glory in the new birth. He is making it clear that only He could have done this. This is why the new birth is the picture that we have in John 3.

It is the same picture that we ended with last week. Christ on the cross. Christ died for God, for the sake of God, to show the glory of God, so that He might be just and justify those who have faith in Jesus. Christ died for God's sake more than Christ died for your sake. The beauty of it is, though, these two things are not in contradiction with one another. Our eternal good shows His eternal glory. The more we are satisfied in Him, the more we see and experience His goodness. The more He shows that this is only happening because of Him. Our eternal good, His eternal glory going together.

This is exactly what we saw back in Ezekiel 36, startling verses in the Old Testament, verses 22 and 23. Right before God gives them these promises of giving them a new heart, He looks at them, at His people, and He says, *"It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name."* I mean, think about it. Right before God gives them this incredible promise, He said, "You need to know from the very beginning, this is not for your sake. This is for my sake." He said, *"I will show the holiness of my great name among the nations. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD, when I show myself holy through you before their eyes."*

Here is the beauty. When God brings about this transformation, this change in our heart, when God reveals our need, enables our belief, what happens is God gets great glory because He takes someone who is spiritually dead and makes them alive. He takes someone who is morally evil, and now, they love that which is good. God gets great glory in this whole process. It is the way it is designed. He transforms us for our good, His glory.

Now, I want you to bring those two truths to bear on the way we perceive salvation and what we are talking about in this whole series. People ask, "Well, you talked about it earlier; you are saying that biblical salvation is not praying a prayer and then going on living like you have had no change in your life, no transformation in your life." People ask "Well, if somebody prays a prayer of salvation, and then you look at their life after that, and there is never any difference, then is that person really saved?" You may have thought about this in your own life, people's lives around you, family, friends. "Is that person really saved when there is absolutely no picture of transformation that began there?"

I want to say this with as much sensitivity as possible because I am in no way claiming that I am the judge of anyone's salvation. God is the eternal Judge. I believe that we definitely have truths in Scripture that tell us what salvation involves. That is what we are looking at here. I am not saying in any way that, once we pray a prayer, that now we have got a job to do to work to try to show this is real; to work to try to earn our salvation to try to make sure it is sealed. That is not the picture here, but at the same time, I think we can say that with confidence, based on Scripture, that if somebody prays a prayer, and there is no transformation that begins at the point, there is no picture of transformation in their lives since then, that that person has not experienced the new birth, that person is not saved.

Here is why I believe we can say that based on Scripture. Two things. Number one, nowhere in Scripture do we see salvation described as a mere human decision by which someone decides to get out of the line going to hell and jump into the line going to heaven. That is not how Scripture describes salvation. Scripture describes salvation, not as jumping out of one line into another so that you can save your skin. Scripture describes salvation as a transformative process in our hearts and in our lives where God raises you out of death into life and shows His great glory in your salvation, in your transformation.

Which leads to the second thing. When we create this idea that salvation is disconnected from transformation, when we create this idea that born again Christians' lives look just like a non-Christian's life, what we are saying is, what we are doing is we are blaspheming God, and we are doing that by saying that God is able to deliver someone out of hell, but He is not able to deliver them from sin in their daily lives on earth. We are saying that God is able to pay the ultimate price, handle the ultimate effect of sin, but He does not have the power to give you victory over sin day by day by day by day.

Ladies and gentlemen, that is not true. The God who saves us from eternal damnation, the God who raised His one and only Son from the grave, that God is more than powerful to give you victory day after day after day over sin. He is more than good to do that, and what we have done is we have robbed God of the glory He is due in salvation by saying He can do this...get me out of hell...but He can't change my life on a daily basis. God will not let us rob His glory in salvation by disconnecting salvation from transformation. This is the picture. It is a process that begins but it is a transformation that begins when we are born again.

Has God transformed your life? Has He transformed your life? Is your life a picture of the glory of God at work, living in the light, so that it may be plain that what is being done has been done through God? Has your life been transformed? Not, "Have you worked enough to prove that you were saved, or that you have tried enough to make sure that it is sealed?" No, is your life a demonstration of the power of God and the transformation that happened to your heart when He opened your eyes to your need, when He took your heart and cleansed it of your sin and put His Spirit in you; when He enabled your belief to turn from sin and trust in Christ, and He transformed your life. Has that happened in you?

The Ultimate Question...

No one can enter the kingdom of God, see the kingdom of God unless He is born again. Are you born again? Have you been born again? This is the ultimate question. Have you been born again? I ask of every single person in this room, every student, child, every man and woman, every church attender and church member, have you been born again? Has this gospel become a reality in your life? When I ask that question, I realize that there are many people who hear that question and wonder, "Is this is a reality in me?"

I hope...I hope that question is at the forefront of your heart, because it leads to one of two things. Don't miss this. Don't stray from that question. Don't try to avoid that question. It is too eternally important to avoid because it leads you to one of two paths. One path that it may lead you to...and I hope this is happening all around this room as we talk about these things in the Word. I talked with people today just in tears because the Word has reminded us...is reminding us in John 3 what happened in the new birth in our lives.

It helps us to realize...we go back and look at this, we realize this is what happened. I see where I was. God opened my eyes to my needs, God changed my heart, and He cleansed me and He put His Spirit in me and began to transform me. He enabled me to turn from sin and trust in Christ, and I hope that this passage is a great encouragement to you, what happened in your new birth for many of you. However, if there is wrestling over whether or not this really happened, then that is worth wrestling with. It is worth you getting alone with the Spirit of God and the Word of God and, night after night, hour after hour, spending time and just know that the Spirit is good. The Spirit is good. *"The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God."*

So, ask this question. Wrestle with this question so that you will not go down a path that is spiritually deceived, going on in religious routine just like Nicodemus was with no spiritual life in your whatsoever. So that, maybe, now in this moment, maybe now, maybe this week as you go with God, as you wrestle with God over this for the first time, He shows you your need for Him. For the first time, He says, "I am going to give you a new heart. I'll cleanse you from all your impurities." God be praised.

This is what He does, and He gives us a new heart and a Spirit in us, and He transforms our life, and we turn from sin, we trust in Christ. This is what it means to be born again, and if it has not happened in your life, I urge you...I urge you, to go before God, ask Him to search your heart, and do these things in you. Even in doing that, you are showing that God is ultimate in your eyes. He is doing this work.

In fact, that is what I want us to do. I want to give you an opportunity to be alone with the Spirit of God and the Word of God. In just a moment, I am going to pray for us. What I want to invite you to do, I want to beg you not to gloss over this. I want to invite you to spend some time wrestling with this question, asking this question, coming face to face with these truths that we have seen in John 3. Have you been born again? I want to invite you to pray along those lines. Ask God, "Have you done this in my life?" Let Him show you if this is a reality or not. If it is a reality, then let Him show you any areas of your life that are still needing transforming. Let Him uncover the areas of your life where He wants to show His glory and His power and His victory over sin in you. Let this drive you to a deeper place of transformation. I want to invite you to spend time with the Word of God and the Spirit of God. Then, after you have finished doing that, you are dismissed. Every single one of us, "Have you been born again?"

Have you been born again?

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