**John 3:1-21 “Born of the Spirit”**  
“I Am” – Sermon 6

Prop: Open your heart to Jesus to bring about the life-giving change you need to be saved.

Intro: Whoever believes in Jesus will have eternal life. Doesn’t that seem pretty straightforward? You believe, you live. That’s easy. Everybody believes in Jesus, right? I mean, not everybody, but most people. We believe he’s a good person; we believe he teaches us to live a good life; we might even believe he did miracles. We certainly believe he existed. Christians, Mormons, Muslims, even atheists believe he lived and probably that he taught good things. We believe in him. Therefore, isn’t it pretty natural to assume that we all have eternal life? But apparently not everyone means the same thing when they talk about believing in Jesus. And right at the outset of this wonderful passage about how to have eternal life, Jesus hits us with this rather mystical, mysterious, and utterly uncontrollable requirement: “No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” This is not a slight tweak to your otherwise good life, or getting your theology correct; this is scrapping the life you had before and starting over by being born all over again. And it is inseparable from believing in Jesus. Jesus begins this passage by talking about a Life-giving Change, and only then does he move on to the Defining Choice.

1. A Life-giving Change
   1. When Jesus says [v 3], it is a direct confrontation of what Nicodemus says, [v 2].
      1. Nicodemus has made a profession of faith: “We,” whoever we are, apparently the rest of us weren’t convinced enough to come along for this discussion—“We know you are a teacher who has come from God.” Before we ever get to Nicodemus, chapter 2 prepared us to meet him. Last week we read [2:23-25; “Now there was a man”]. This is Nicodemus: he saw the signs and he believed.
      2. Lots of people “believe in Jesus.” Muslims believe in Jesus. They believe God sent him, he was a prophet, he did miracles, and just before he got to the cross, God rescued him and put some other person in his place so it would look like Jesus was crucified. Atheists believe in Jesus. They believe he was a teacher, well maybe not from God, because they don’t believe in God, but they believe Jesus was a teacher. Does that count? Demons believe in Jesus. Every time Jesus would meet one, it would scream in terror, “What do you want with me, Holy One of God?” Demons have a higher opinion of Jesus than most human beings do. They believe in Jesus. And it does them no good. Nicodemus was one of those people who saw the signs and believed that Jesus was a teacher from God, but that kind of Profession of faith is not enough.
   2. Nicodemus claims to believe Jesus is a teacher come from God. Let’s see if that’s really true. Because immediately Jesus begins to teach him. If he really believes in Jesus as a teacher, won’t he do what Jesus teaches? What about you? We can claim to believe in Jesus. But we see whether that’s true or not when we decide whether or not to do what he teaches. And the first thing he says is, “I tell you the truth,” this is not a debatable point but absolutely certain, “no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”
      1. Now Jesus isn’t just pulling out the most bizarre teaching in his book to see whether Nicodemus will really believe him. This is what has to happen to every person who believes in Jesus. We read this back in the prologue of John: “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.” (1:11-13)
      2. Those who believe in Jesus go through a change, a rebirth. Nicodemus isn’t sure what he means [v 4]; like, “Whoa! False start. Back on the line, let’s start this thing over.” Sometimes we suggest that coming to Jesus means you get another chance, start over, blank slate, and we try it all over again from the start. Absolutely not. I don’t care how many tries you give me, how many chances I get, I ruin them all. Give me a blank slate and I will make a mess of it. I mean, really, how often do you make it through a day without acting selfishly? This is not like a Buddhist reincarnation cycle where you’re born over and over again until you finally get it right. When we are born, we have a selfish nature. Being born all over again with a selfish nature is not going to help. Coming to Jesus is not another chance. It’s a supernatural change.
      3. [5-8] Flesh gives birth to flesh. It will always give birth to flesh. We in our natural ability will never produce spiritual life in ourselves. We will never produce it in our children. Flesh can only give birth to flesh. In order to come to life spiritually, we need to be born of the Spirit of God. Jesus will talk about this in chapters 4 and 7 as living water, but it’s the Holy Spirit coming inside of you and bringing you to life.
   3. This is all over the Bible. So when Nicodemus asks in v 9, “How can this be?” Jesus says, “Don’t you know this?” Not just “Do you not understand,” but really, “Is this news to you? Your Israel’s teacher. Haven’t you even read the Prophets?”
      1. Joel 2:28, “And afterward I will pour out my Spirit on all people.”
      2. Isaiah 44:3, “For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendents.”
      3. And best of all, in Ezekiel 37 Ezekiel is shown this valley full of dead, dry human bones, and he is told “These bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.” But then God tells him, “Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live.” (37:11, 13-14) Are they physically dead? No, but they were spiritually dead. So God had told Ezekiel in the chapter before, “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. I will give you a new heart and put 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.” (36:25-27)
      4. We need new hearts and new spirits. We need the Spirit of God to come into us and bring us to life. Nicodemus should have known this. Not just rules and rituals and religion but a rebirth through the Spirit of God. The apostle Paul says the same thing in the New Testament: “He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.” (Titus 3:5-6) It’s the same thing he means when he says, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17). If you come to Jesus, you will be born again, created new, brought to life by the power of the Spirit of God.
   4. Eternal life is something that starts now, and it’s something you will see working in you. As God told Ezekiel, “I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.” When you are born of God, you love God. You have a new spirit that loves the things he loves. Yes, you still have a selfish nature to contend with, which we’re taught to take off like dirty clothes, but you have put on a new self “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” (Eph 4:24) This is more than just a New Year’s resolution to try harder to be good; this is the transformation of your heart. God won’t have to threaten you not to sin. You won’t be able to sit comfortably in sin anymore, it’ll drive you crazy, because you genuinely love what God loves.
      1. This is what takes place when the Spirit of God comes into you and gives you eternal life. It’s not some weird branch of Christianity that is optional; this is absolute bedrock of Christian faith. Don’t expect that when you die you’re suddenly going to receive eternal life if that eternal life isn’t even now in you and changing how you live. I’m not talking about trying to earn your salvation by doing enough good works; there’s no level of good works short of perfection that you can achieve to be saved. But you will not enter the kingdom of God unless you receive that new birth of water and the Spirit.
   5. Now we’ve talked about the Spirit, but what does it mean to be born of water? This has shown up all along, back in Ezekiel when God sprinkles his people with clean water and they are clean, and it’s an image we still use in baptism.
      1. Am I saying you have to be baptized? Well, yes. In water? Yes. Jesus told his disciples to go out baptizing new disciples, and they went and baptized them, in water. It’s absolutely clear throughout the story of the church in Acts. Being baptized in the Holy Spirit is not in place of baptism in water. Very often the two are connected; Jesus himself had the Holy Spirit come on him when he was baptized in water. Peter told the crowd at Pentecost to repent and be baptized, and they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 10 it went the other way, and people received the Holy Spirit and then were baptized in water. Water is a symbol of cleansing and a symbol of the Holy Spirit. If you’re willing to surrender your life God to be born again, why would you start by picking a fight with him over baptism? If you want to follow Jesus and you haven’t been baptized, come talk to me.
      2. The water itself isn’t magic. God is able to save without it, as he did for the thief on the cross who died next to Jesus whom he told, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” But the obedience is important and what it symbolizes is important. The water demonstrates that we’ve been cleansed, because it also demonstrates our participation with Jesus in his death, burial, and resurrection.
2. A Defining Choice
   1. And the death and resurrection of Jesus is why we can be born again. Like we read in the prologue, “To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” This new birth only happens through faith in Jesus. Without his death and resurrection, there is no life. This leads to that Defining Choice.
      1. John 3:16 really is a beautiful and powerful summary of the message of the gospel. But we get so used to hearing it, that it doesn’t surprise us anymore. Just the beginning of it is really unusual, “For God so loved the world.” If you take this phrase by itself, you might come away with a pretty positive view of the world, but that’s not how the Bible usually talks about the world, and John least of all. Here are some more things Jesus says about the world in the book of John: “The world hates me because I testify that what it does is evil.” (7:7) “I am not of this world” (8:23). “If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.” (15:19) “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (16:33) When Jesus talks about the world, it is hostile to God and hostile to him, because the world is so different from God, and what it does is evil. It’s not really so surprising then when John says in his first letter, “Do not love the world or the things of the world… for everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world.” (1 Jn 2:15-16) The world by and large is not on friendly terms with God, doesn’t lead you to God, and doesn’t earn God’s approval.
      2. But this is the world that God loves. He doesn’t love the world because the world is like him but because it’s lost without him and he has compassion on it. One of my professors from seminary wrote that this is different from “the selfish love of participation” that we need to avoid. When God loves the world, he “loves the world with the selfless, costly love of redemption.” We often loves things because we like what they do for us, which is why it’s dangerous to give our love to the wrong things. But God loves the world not for what it can do for him because of what he can do for it.
      3. So God sends his Son into the world as a Light into darkness. There is no question about what he has to do. He didn’t come to receive the comforts of the world, the honor and respect of the world. He came to be killed by the world so that he could take the sins of the world on himself and receive the condemnation that they deserve. When Jesus says in v 14 that the Son of Man must be lifted up, he means the way that bronze snake was lifted up back in the book of Numbers. The people complained against God and fought with God so much that God sent poisonous snakes to kill them, but because of Moses’ prayers, God told them to make this bronze snake and put it up on a pole so people could look at it and be cured of the poison if they were bitten. Jesus is saying, I’m also going to be hung up on a pole, so that the poison of your sin doesn’t kill you. Instead it will kill me.
      4. This is how God loved the world: he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him will not be lost but have eternal life.
   2. When the world was darkness, God sent his own precious Light into world. But his coming presents a Defining choice, because it shows who wants to be free from their sins, and who would rather remain in their sins. [17-21]
      1. Remember, God sent his own Son into the world to die in order to save people. You hear people say things like, “What if someone never heard about Jesus? Or what if they didn’t have the same opportunities to hear about Jesus as others? That’s not fair for God to condemn them just because they didn’t hear.” But wait a second; no one is suggesting God condemns anyone for not hearing. It’s not like everyone would have been just fine if Jesus had never come, but now suddenly they’re condemned. We weren’t fine without Jesus. We were all condemned without Jesus. Before the Light came into the world, it was all darkness, and not a single one of us would have been saved. Death is not the wages of not hearing, death is the wages of sin. We’re condemned because of our disobedience to God, our selfishness, our unkindness. Was God under some obligation to offer up his Son to die for *our* offenses against him? He didn’t have to do that; if we died in our sins, that’s our fault. But he offered up his Son because he loved us so that when there was no hope, we might have hope of salvation.
      2. So when someone turns their nose up at Jesus’ death for them, and says, Thanks but I’m not religious, and continues in their sins, do they deserve anything but God’s condemnation? They’re guilty twice, once for their sin, and once for rejecting God’s Son. Now I agree, it’s not fair if someone never gets the chance to hear about Jesus. But does that mean God’s not being fair or we’re not being fair? If we have the gospel and we’re saving ourselves, but then we sit down all contentedly while others dying without ever having the chance to receive what we have, I agree, that’s not fair. So what are we doing to take it to them? Don’t tell the God who loved the world so much he gave his Son to die that he’s not being fair to people who haven’t heard if you’re not out there telling them.
   3. We’re all in our sins, we’re all in darkness, but then the Light comes into the world, and now suddenly there is a choice.
      1. The first option is v 20. We stay in the dark. We know we have sins; well, maybe we don’t think there’s anything wrong with them, but that Bible gets us. We don’t need God or the church telling us how to run our lives, we’ll try to be good, but don’t expect me to go asking for forgiveness. And so not only do we stay in our sins, but we scorn the death of Jesus. And we stand condemned.
      2. The other option is v 21. And notice, it doesn’t say, “Whoever does everything right” but “*Whoever lives by the truth* comes into the light.” People don’t come into the light because they have nothing to hide and everything they do is right anyway. Instead they come to Jesus, lay their lives out in front of him, knowing there are things that need to change, there is sin that needs to be forgiven. Why else would we come to the cross? We put our faith in Jesus’ death for us because we need our sins to be paid for.
      3. But once our sins are forgiven, we don’t just get a blank slate to mess up again. When we put our faith in Jesus, not only are our sins paid for by his death, but we are given new life by his resurrection from the dead. When Jesus pours out his Holy Spirit on us, we don’t just try again, we receive his resurrection life in us. We don’t have to try again, Jesus has already won eternal life for us, and that life transforms us into new creations.
   4. “Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” But whoever believes in him does more than just say, “I believe in him.” I’m not asking you whether you WILL have eternal life; can you already see that eternal life in you? Have you been born of the Holy Spirit? Because if not, Jesus says you will not enter the kingdom of God. You can’t receive eternal life hanging back in the darkness. You need to come into the light, sins and all, trust in Jesus’ death to wash away your sins and ask him to transform you by the life of his resurrection.