

A Fresh Start

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[0 : 00] We've heard that many times, we've heard that along with them. Please, can we start again? In some ways it's a cry of desperation, as they realise that because of a wrong move or a wrong choice, that they're out of the game or that they've lost.

And sometimes, if I'm feeling very generous, we will start again, we'll have another go. We'll gather up all the pieces and we'll put them all back into their places and we'll begin and start all over again. Another opportunity to make better choices, another chance to do things differently. Now, the truth be told, we can probably feel exactly the same when it comes to the big game of life.

We often may say to ourselves, can we please start again? It may be a cry of regret, a cry of unrealised expectations or a cry of self-pity.

As we review the things that have happened in the past year or even further back, choices that we have made, things that we've said, the actions that we have taken, we probably all wish from time to time that we could just start again.

[1 : 16] And in many ways, people say the new year provides the opportunity that we need to start again. A fresh start to make new promises as we set goals for the coming year.

But I think, if we're honest with ourselves, we all know that by January the 7th or the 9th, we'll look back and we'll already be saying, I wish we could start again.

And things are just the same. We all long at different times for a new beginning and certainly the new year provides that opportunity to refocus our minds and to think about a new beginning.

Well, for our encouragement, the God of the Bible specialises in new beginnings. If we just take a quick scan through from Genesis right up to Isaiah 55, we see that he is a God of beginnings.

He created a good and beautiful world. That was a new beginning. But not too long into that new creation, we see mankind making their own actions and choices that actually break God's beautiful world.

[2 : 26] But no sooner is it broken that God comes to Noah. He promises that he's going to destroy the world, but that he's going to start again, this time with a family of eight.

And then as we read through, we get to Genesis chapter 11, and we see the world descending into disorder and chaos again as they seek to build a great big building up to the sky, up to heaven itself.

They want to rule the world. And in response, God comes to a man called Abraham. And he promises to start again.

As all the nations were scattered, as there was a new, all different kinds of languages, people were spread across the world. God promises to start again. And he says to Abraham, I'm going to build a new nation.

I'm going to build a new people who will enjoy the blessing of God forever. But as we read on, this new nation, Israel, ends up in slavery in Egypt, oppressed and on the brink of destruction.

[3 : 33] But God intervenes again, this time through Moses. They're rescued. And there's another opportunity to start again, a new beginning, a fresh start in the promised land.

And as we follow through the history of Israel, God continually provides new kings, new leaders to replace those that were corrupt and that were bad.

God always bringing a new beginning and a fresh start. But the rebellion and the rejection becomes so great that God sends them off into exile.

And that's where we come to in Isaiah 55, where God is promising another new beginning, another fresh start for his people.

And in Isaiah 55, verse 1, it says, Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters. Verse 3, Come, give ear, come to me, hear me, that your soul may live.

[4 : 37] So it was an invitation for the people to start again, to come back to God, to get back to their roots, to get things right.

In fact, God had promised them a complete transformation. in this new beginning. In verse 5, he says, Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations that do not know you will run to you.

So here is a nation presently in exile, but he's telling them that they are going to have such a transformation, it'll be such a new beginning and a fresh start, that not only are they going to come back to their own land, but that they are going to become a nation that is so attractive that other nations are going to run to them and find the salvation that they could have from God as well.

So it seems that this God who specialises in new beginnings is determined to put things right. But I think we should know that when we read through Isaiah, and indeed anywhere through the Old Testament, that as Isaiah spoke of this fresh start, he was looking forward to the ultimate new beginning.

Because as we saw in verses 1-5 the other week, it all pictured, it all pointed forward to the coming of the Messiah, God's chosen and appointed king who would give the greatest fresh start.

[6 : 05] The king, the Lord Jesus, who invited people to come to him, those who were thirsty, those who were hungry, said, Come to me, you will never thirst, you will never hunger again.

Come to me and receive life, receive eternal life, receive that new beginning, that fresh start that only I can give. So, here's God coming to his people, summoning them to say, Come to me for a fresh start and a new beginning.

And we want to ask the question, Well, how can we experience this new beginning? Well, as we start into the new year, I want to give us three things that will help us to experience the new beginning.

And the first is this, it is something we can have. Something we can have, a new life. God promised a fresh start to his people, but to experience it for themselves, it needed a response.

And if we want a fresh start and a new beginning, this is the kind of response we need. It must start with urgent repentance. Look at verse 7.

[7 : 19] He says there, Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil person his thoughts. Now, they're not words that we would readily use to describe ourselves.

We think of other people as being wicked. We think of murderers and paedophiles as being evil. But here is God's description, God's collective description for all mankind because it's very clear that we've all turned away from God.

We try to give ourselves the fresh start. We try to live without him. We try to rule and run our own lives without him. And so the invitation at the very beginning is to come and to repent.

It says to forsake his way. Literally, it's to turn our backs on trying to run our own life. And in turning back from that, we are to turn to the Lord.

We are to accept God's rule over our life. Not only are we to turn away from something, to stop trying to run our own life and be in control of our own lives, but we are to turn to the one who is the ruler over our lives.

[8 : 35] And so as we start into 2011, this is the path that we ought to take. One that turns from trying to run and rule our own ways and do our own thing and to submit our lives completely to his rule.

But please note that this is something that we can't put off. Look at verse 6. It says, Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call on him while he's near.

So it's implying that God will not always be found. He's not always going to be near. Presently he is. Christmas has reminded us that God came close to us in Jesus Christ.

He did come near. But there will come a time where people will look for him and they won't find him. People will call but there will be no answer.

And so there's something of an urgency here that we get our lives sorted out quickly while there is time, while Christ is here for us. And it goes the same not just for us but for those that we know.

[9 : 46] It's no good putting off this invitation. We must seek the Lord while he may be found and to call on him while he's near. It's a little bit like the January sales if any of you have ventured into town.

The invitation is here today. Sale now on. Come while the offer is still available. If you put it off and wait until February then it will be too late.

Everything will be gone. And so God offers this new beginning today. He says, don't wait until it's too late. Get it now while it's available. And for all of those who avail of this offer they won't be disappointed.

Look at the rest of verse 7. He says, turn to the Lord he will have mercy. Turn to our God and he will freely forgive.

So anybody who turns at any time will never be disappointed. we receive the greatest of fresh starts because the slate is wiped clean. We are given a brand new beginning.

[10:55] And in many ways this is just a sign of God's amazing grace towards us because the way in which God deals with us is beyond our wildest dreams and expectations.

Look at verse 8. He says, for my thoughts are not your thoughts neither are your ways my ways declares the Lord. He doesn't give us what we do deserve.

We deserve to be punished. We deserve to be dealt with. But instead he gives us what we don't deserve. And we operate as people on the basis that we must earn everything that we get.

we're judged according to our good performance. Even our children are brought up because they're told you won't get anything unless you're good. But God doesn't deal with us in that way.

He deals with us with grace. He says in verse 7 as the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

[11:58] We are completely different to God. We don't act the same way that God acts. He deals with us so differently than the way in which we deal with each other.

There's no way that we can ever get to God through our own efforts. There's no way that we can enjoy Him by the good things that we do. But yet God is the one who reaches down into our lives.

My thoughts are not your thoughts. My ways are not your ways. I don't work the way in which the way you work. I work differently. I work by grace. I intervene into people's lives.

I give them a new beginning and a fresh start. So he offers them something to have. A brand new life.

That is a brand new life that we can have now. But this is a life that we can continue with as we live a life of repentance and live a life in God's grace each and every day.

[12:57] So that is something for us all to have. A brand new life. But the second thing is that we have something to share.

We have a new story to share. God's promise of salvation and a new beginning was not just for Israel. As verse 5 implied, it would be for all nations, for all people.

So it seems that this new beginning that God has on offer for his people is something that is to be shared. Other people are to be told about it.

And it's the same with our new life. With our salvation. Our story is also to be told to other people. And what's so amazing about it, when we do tell our story, it can have an effect on people's lives that their lives are also changed and that they also receive a brand new beginning.

And the reason is because of two things. God's power and God's promise. Look at verse 10 at God's power. It says, As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it blood and flourish so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth.

[14:24] Now I think we've all had our fair share of rain over the year and in recent weeks we've had our fair share of snow and everything else, other forms of precipitation that have fallen.

And it's caused a lot of chaos. Some of us have been without water. Thankfully it's back on. But it's very soon we are going to see the true effects of all the water and all the snow that's fallen.

Seeds that fell to the ground earlier in the year will begin to germinate. We'll see small shoots will appear in the ground and then they'll grow into plants and then we'll see buds appearing on the plants and then they will turn to blossom and then the blossom will turn to flowers, the flowers will fall and then we'll see fruits which will produce more seeds and more plants and more fruit for more people.

And all of these effects, it all happens so naturally that we don't really take notice of what happens. But it's all a result, as we see in verse 10, of the rain and the snow that falls.

Without the rain there would be no life. And so, verse 11, so it is, God says, with my word that goes out from my mouth.

[15:48] He's saying that as the story of God's salvation is told, it's like the effect of rain on the earth. Now we might think that some seeds look a bit dead and rotten and not up to much and we

can see people as being a little bit unresponsive and a little bit dead and we think that they can't really respond to God and how are they ever going to experience the new life?

But when God's word is spoken, when his story, when his salvation is spoken into people's life, something powerful happens, a brand new life begins to appear and begins to take shape.

So God's power in God's story and his salvation is powerful but this power also comes with a promise. Look at the rest of verse 11.

It says, it will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

So just as the rain and the snow falls and has an impact and the impact is undeniable because we see brand new shoots and new plants coming up.

[17:11] So it is exactly the same with God's word. Look at the emphasis in verse 11. It says, it will not return to me empty. It will accomplish what I desire.

It will achieve the purpose for which I sent it. You see, when we receive God's offer of new life we have been given a story.

God's salvation is also our story. It's a story that is to be told because our life has been changed.

Our life has been transformed. We now have a story of hope and of salvation of forgiveness of mercy of grace.

And so when we begin to speak our story to others we can be assured that God will do his promised work. And I want to encourage us over this coming year and I want you to think right now of people that you're going to meet and people that you're going to see over this year who you know are not yet Christians.

People who haven't yet experienced God's new beginning and new life. And I want you to be encouraged not because of you or because of your words but because of God's power and God's promise.

[18:30] Because as you begin to speak your story as you begin to speak that salvation into other people's life there will be effects.

That's God's promise. It's not my making it up. This is God's promise to us. We mightn't see the effects immediately just as the seeds don't sprout immediately just as when the rain falls we don't see immediate growth but over time in the coming year maybe even next year maybe in a couple of years God has promised look at the promise read it for yourselves again in verse 11 it will not return to me empty it will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

As God's story as our story of new life is told it will penetrate deep into people's lives his spirit will water that word hardened hearts will be softened and new shoots will begin and there will be the beginnings of new life.

Over the Christmas we gave out calendars over the coming year we'll be giving out the prodigal son leaflets that we've put together and we may think what's the point in doing that is anybody going to read it will anybody be changed it's God's words it's powerful and it comes with a promise and so here is something secondly that we have to share we have a new story we've been given a new beginning a fresh start and that new beginning and fresh start is to be told it's a story for others that they can have but the third thing that I want to give us this morning is that we have something to enjoy not only have we been given something a new life not only have we something to share a new story but we have something to enjoy a new world the bible clearly introduces us to a God who specialises in new beginnings and one day God is going to bring about the last of his new beginnings the new heavens and the new earth in all its fullness and this new beginning will be a great celebration look at verse 12 it says you will go out in joy and be led forth in peace the mountains and the hills will burst into song before you the trees of the field will clap their hands it's pointing forward to the new heaven and the new earth and it's like all

God's people and all of nature will be joining in this great celebration it will be a new lease of life it's like nature becomes everything that it was intended to be we see so much that is broken so much that is corrupt things don't work the way it is but here in this picture it's almost like the hills and the mountains are rolling in excitement the branches of the trees begin swaying as they clap their their branches together creating an enormous sound and it's as if God is the conductor conducting this world of nature and his people bringing out a wonderful symphony of praise and celebration as they all come together now while this is all celebrations to come it is something that we can begin to celebrate now because it was prompt because it has been promised it is guaranteed just as

[22 : 31] God's word is promised to have an effect it's guaranteed to do a work so God's promise of the new heaven and the new earth is promised it's guaranteed so we can celebrate today what we know we are going to have tomorrow it's a little bit like celebrating the new year if any of you are at a new year celebration this year you'll know that the party starts well before midnight nobody turns up at twelve o'clock we all turn up before twelve o'clock because we're celebrating in anticipation of what's to come and then when it strikes midnight everybody celebrates the poppers go the fireworks go the lanterns go or whatever else you saw on new year's eve everything happens the party begins but the celebration begins before that in anticipation of what's to come and it's the same way what god has promised we can begin to celebrate today because it is guaranteed but the reason why we can celebrate is because the curse has been removed the bad is replaced and the good is restored look at verse 13 instead of the thorn bush will grow the pine tree instead of the briars the myrtle will grow it's telling us that the curse is going to be broken there will be no more thorns or briars in life no more sharp stings no more the sting of death no more the sting of anything there will be no more pain no more sickness no more suffering no more death and no more disease no more disappointment and no more heartache instead of the curse blessings are going to flow across the world it says that there will be instead of the briar the myrtle will grow instead of the thorn bush the pine tree will grow the pine and the myrtle were the great evergreens symbolising the fullness and the continuation of life it will be beauty upon beauty the world restored to absolute perfection this is what

God is going to do and this is what we can celebrate today it's already ours I don't know if any of you went to the cinema to see the new Narnia the voyage of the dawn treader has anybody seen it yep do you enjoy it yep very good recommend you to go to all Narnia films and read the stories full of symbolism it's wonderful let me just read to you the books are better than the films by the way there's a lot more in them but at the end of the dawn treader they're seeking to deal with the curse there's been a curse and the three lords are sleeping and they want to undo this curse and they've got to go to the end of the world to make sure that the curse is lifted and they're setting off across the sea and as they go across the sea they're going across a sea full of white lilies and they're coming towards the end of the world and in the book the chapter is called the very end of the world there was no need to row for the current drifted them steadily to the east none of them slept or ate all that night and all next day they glided eastward and when the third day dawned with a brightness you or I could not even bear even if we had dark glasses on they saw a wonder ahead it was as if a wall stood up between them and the sky a greyish green trembling shimmering wall then up came the sun and at its first rising they saw it through the wall and it turned into wonderful rainbow colours then they knew that the wall was really a long tall wave a wave endlessly fixed in one place as you may often see at the edge of the waterfall they could not have even seen even if the sun sorry they could not have seen even if the sun their eyes had been strengthened by the water of the last sea but now they could look at the rising sun and see it clearly and see things beyond it what they saw eastward beyond the sun was a range of mountains it was so high that neither they never saw the top of it nor ever forgot it none of them remembered seeing any sky in that direction and the mountains must really have been outside the world for any mountains even a quarter of a twentieth of that height ought to have had ice and snow in them but these were warm and green and full of forest and waterfalls however high you looked no one in that boat doubted that they were seen beyond the end of the world into

Aslan's country Isaiah the prophet who's been writing for us here has also been given a bird's eye view into Aslan's country we can read of it in Isaiah 65 if you want to turn to it there Isaiah 65 As he pictures what is to come it's as if he has been given a glimpse beyond the sun to be able to look beyond to the sun to see the new creation verse 17 behold I will create a new heavens and a new earth the former things will not be remembered nor will they come to mind verse 20 never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days or an old man who does not live out his years he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed they will build houses and dwell in them they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit no longer will they build houses and others live in them or plant and others eat for as the days of a tree so will the days of my people my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands they will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune for they will be a people blessed by the Lord they and their descendants with them verse 25 the wolf and the lamb will feed together the lion will eat straw like the ox but dust will be the servants food they will neither harm nor destroy on all

my holy mountain says the Lord so this is a wonderful new world something that we have been given something to enjoy and this new world will be God's eternal sign back in chapter 5 verse 13 at the very end says that this will be for the Lord's renown for an everlasting sign which will not be destroyed the new heaven and the new earth will be God's sign that this will never be there will never be a new beginning again this will be it for all eternity never again will we have to say please can we start again because this is a new world which we have to enjoy so these are three things that we have been given something we've been given a new life something to share a new story something to enjoy a new world and I just want us to think how this very briefly how this affects our past our present in the future if we have a new life the past is forgiven our sins are forgotten they are all dealt with at the cross each day we can find his forgiveness afresh each day is a fresh start each moment is a fresh start with him and it affects the present because we have a new story this week whatever your situation whether you're employed or unemployed whatever may come we have the greatest story to tell salvation the new beginning the new life and we have God's promise of his word that he will do his work in people's lives but we also find that this affects our future we don't know what the future holds a lot of it is going to be bleak I can assure you that as we come into a new year with the way the economy is all kinds of things will happen to us there may be sickness there may even be death but we have been given the promise of a new world a new future where everything is taken care of where we will rest and celebrate forever in the new heaven and the new earth a day will come where we will never ever have to say please can we start again because it will all be over and we will be with the Lord so if you are looking for a fresh start Isaiah 55 is the place to go to and I encourage you to keep turning to that in the year that's ahead let's pray together we'll just take a moment or two if anybody would like to pray in response to what we've heard then please feel free to do with and if

[33 : 21] I will close to B or see