

Wanting a Fresh Start

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] Well, some of you may be visiting this week, that's okay, but if you were here last week, you would have heard me ask you to consider how you might tell your life story.

Now this week I want to pose a further question, and that is, what if there were parts of that life story that you didn't like, that you wish to change, maybe even erase, or maybe it's so bad you want to start all over again.

If only you could have your time all over again. And look around the world today, and if you see some of the world's conflicts, you might think the same of this world.

If we could only have a fresh start, go back to the point before things started to go wrong, and perhaps try and do it differently this time. Mind you, we'll have to go back a long, long way if you wanted to do that for the world.

Well, in our passage today, Nicodemus comes to see Jesus, and this is exactly what Jesus offers Nicodemus, a fresh start. But first, let's meet the person Nicodemus, whom we have a picture of in verse 1.

[1 : 13] So if you look on the screen, on your Bibles, it says, Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. So Nicodemus was a man of some social standing, a Pharisee, well-versed in the law, Jewish law, and also a member of the ruling council.

But he comes, as we read, to Jesus at night, in the dark, so others wouldn't find out. You see, even though Nicodemus is drawn to hear what Jesus has to say, Jesus isn't quite respectable company. And so even the way Nicodemus approaches Jesus reflects this, where he tries not to let on that he's actually really looking for answers. For he says, Rabbi, we know that you're a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.

He can't quite bring himself, can he, to ask Jesus directly what he wants to know. After all, he's a Pharisee, he's a member of the council, you know, surely he must have the answers himself.

But Jesus cuts through the facade, he answers his implied question, because John writes that in verse 3 that Jesus replied, Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.

[2 : 36] Jesus senses, therefore, that Nicodemus is interested in the coming of God's kingdom. This was the hope of all Israel, that God would restore the kingdom to Israel.

After many years in exile, and then followed by centuries of oppressive rule by the Romans and before them other foreign powers. Israel as a whole, as a whole country, as a nation, was longing for a fresh start.

But the question is, when or how will this come about? But what Jesus now says to Nicodemus puzzles him. And if you feel the same, don't be embarrassed, because Jesus is not given a straightforward answer, has he?

But let's try and understand what Jesus is saying. He uses the phrase born again, which could actually mean either being reborn or born from above.

So both senses are actually applicable. But whichever meaning we use, Jesus is saying that this is a requirement for seeing the kingdom, isn't it?

[3 : 44] If Nicodemus and others wanted to see or witness the fulfillment of God's promises to them in the Old Testament, and see Israel's rightful king come to the throne, they needed to be born again.

Now, it's natural for us to see this in physical terms, which then makes us go, well, this is not possible, is it? And that is exactly what Nicodemus' response is in verse 4.

How can someone be born again when they are old? Nicodemus asks, surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born. Quite so, Jesus.

Except Jesus wasn't speaking literally, was he? He was talking about a different kind of birth. A spiritual one. This then is the fresh start that Jesus was offering Nicodemus.

A new beginning, a new kind of life. Which now Jesus in verse 5 goes on to explain. Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.

[4 : 47] 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. So Jesus here is revealing a bit more, another clue to the puzzle. If being born again also could mean born from a birth, as I indicated earlier, then this aligns with being born of the Spirit, doesn't it?

Because the Spirit comes from God from a birth in heaven. But just as flesh can only give birth to flesh, then it's only God's Spirit that can give someone spiritual birth.

Because after all, have you seen a dog give birth to a cat? Or a horse to a goat? Pretty sure you haven't.

I hope not. So only the Spirit can give spiritual life, isn't it? Only by the Spirit can you be born again of the Spirit. And notice the idea here of God's kingdom is now expanded.

[5 : 56] Because whereas in verse 3, Jesus spoke about seeing the kingdom, Jesus now says that it's only possible to see the kingdom if Nicodemus first enters the kingdom.

Which only happens if he is born again or born of the Spirit. Jesus says God will fulfill his promise to Israel, not by establishing a physical kingdom, but a spiritual one.

And those who wish to see it must first enter it. How? By being born of the Spirit. Now how does anyone do this?

Well, it's rather elusive, Jesus says, because he says it's like the wind. This week as I was riding my bike, I got a taste of the wind. I was having an easy time really, heading into the city.

Doing, you know, really well. Then out of nowhere, I was hit by a strong headwind. And boom, it suddenly got so much harder. But then, you know, I thought, well, let's not worry, because I'm about to turn around.

[7 : 01] And then it should get easier going back. Unfortunately, when I did turn around, the wind suddenly started blowing the other way. So I had to go back into the wind, and this time uphill as well.

Well, the same goes for the Spirit, isn't it? It comes and it goes as he pleases. Spiritual birth cannot be predicted. You know, it's a bit, it's not like natural birth, where, you know, if you see a pregnant mother, you know that sometime over the next nine months, as the womb gets bigger and bigger, the baby will be born.

But that's not how it is with the Spirit, or being born of the Spirit. And so, if it's so unpredictable, how does one enter the kingdom? Well, Nicodemus is likewise puzzled, and he asks in verse 9, how can this be?

To which Jesus replied, very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we've seen. But still you people do not accept our testimony. I've spoken to you of earthly things, and you do not believe.

Now, 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 wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.

[8 : 25] Now, I want to focus on the last sentence here, because it may be that some of the other parts that I've just read is not too clear, but this last sentence is actually very clear, because Jesus here offers what is the fresh start.

Everyone who believes will have eternal life in him. The him here is Jesus himself, of course, for he is the Son of Man. What is being offered by Jesus is actually very attractive, because being born of the Spirit brings eternal life.

This is not a fresh start where you then start to peter up after a while. No, this is a fresh start that will go on forever. And not only does it go on forever, what we experience will be amazing, far superior than even the best this world can offer.

And so what I'm referring to here isn't about luxury living, is it? Not about living the high life, eating the finest cuisine, the best sushi, that kind of stuff, enjoying the best entertainment.

No, the promise of eternal life here is one of true peace, where you are in a community of relationships which are marked by authentic love and care, where even though people are not perfect, there is no conflict that arises because of pride or self-centeredness.

[9 : 51] And as a result, there is grace and generosity, forgiveness and forbearance, patience and kindness. This is the spiritual kingdom that Jesus is offering to Nicodemus, inviting him to enter, provided he is born of the Spirit.

And that sounds like an amazing kingdom, doesn't it, to belong to, but what makes it even possible? Well, Jesus explains in what is probably the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3.16, probably the one verse that you all start to memorize when you're growing up in a kid's church.

It says, 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 they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. And so we find out here that this kingdom is made possible only because of Jesus himself, God's one and only Son, whom God gave to us, not just by sending him into the world, but by sending him even to the cross, so that he might be lifted up to die for us.

And this is just Jesus was referring to earlier when he spoke of the fact that he will be lifted up just as Moses lifted up the snake. That reading was earlier in Numbers chapter 21 verse 4, and we'll look quickly at it on the screen now.

[11 : 29] There, the people of Israel, when they left Egypt, they were wandering in the wilderness because they rebelled against God. But one time they grumbled. They complained, and so they said in the orange, Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?

There is no bread. There is no water. And we detest this miserable food. Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them. They bit the people, and many Israelites died.

The people came to Moses and said, We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us. So Moses prayed for the people.

The Lord said to Moses, Make a snake and put it on a pole. Anyone who is bitten can look at it and live. So Moses made a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

It is interesting, isn't it, that they asked Moses to pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us. Right? But what did God do? He did not answer that prayer, did he?

[12 : 31] Instead, he provided a bronze snake so that people needed to look to that snake by faith in order to be saved, in order not to die.

And so in the same way, when we look to Jesus and believe in him, we too are saved. We don't die, but have eternal life, born again by the Spirit. You see, even if you think your life is pretty good right now, the fact is, we all need a fresh start.

Unless you can claim to have a perfect and sinless life, then you need a fresh start, which begins when our relationship with God is restored.

Otherwise, even though you may not realize it, you are estranged, you are separated from your Creator. In fact, the whole world needs a fresh start, don't you think, when you look around?

It's not hard to see, is it? I'm not just talking about the conflicts that are far away in Gaza and Ukraine, but just look, just look at our own city and the crimes, the drive-by shootings, the burnt-out tobacco shops, youth violence, domestic violence, mental anxiety, depression, marital breakdowns.

[13 : 54] we may not like it, but our world is already perishing. It's under a sentence of death, facing condemnation. And so unless we experience new birth by the Spirit, unless we believe in Jesus, we actually already stand condemned by virtue of living in a perishing world with no escape.

It's not God that condemns us, Jesus says, but our very own rebellion against Him. Look again at verse 18. It says, God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.

You know, we may think that we are safe on this huge ocean liner in rough seas, and what God is doing is He's coming and trying to push us overboard. But actually, we're already drowning in the high seas, and Jesus is the rescue board that comes to pull us out of it.

Friends, don't be deceived by the mirage of a civil society. What we can see, this so-called progress of humanity, is not going to last.

All the world's earthly kingdoms will come to an end one day, and our own earthly lives will probably end even sooner. But when we are born again, what we have is spiritual life.

[15 : 18] This fresh start that will propel us into eternity. Now, don't get mistaken here, because when we become a Christian, it doesn't mean that all the problems of our earthly life will then suddenly disappear.

If that's what you expect, no, you will be disappointed. Because for a while, we will still live in both worlds as it is. In the two kingdoms, the earthly and the spiritual.

We will still face brokenness and heartbreaks in this life. And in fact, when you become a Christian, more may be added. But at the same time, so were the blessings of this spiritual life, because you will have an unshakable hope beyond this life, a secure relationship with your Creator, restored, forgiven, because He has sent His Son to die for you.

And really, rebellion against God is the biggest issue anyone can have in their life, bigger than any challenge that you might be facing. In fact, sometimes the sticky situations that we face in our lives are a result of our rebellion against God, living our way instead of God's way.

But when we're born again, this biggest problem of estrangement with God goes away immediately. We enter His kingdom, we live under His rule, yes, but we also live under His care.

[16 : 46] And so as Christians, our life is a bit like a space shuttle. I'm sure you've seen many images of it after launch. If you haven't, I've got a little graphic there.

You can see those are huge boosters and tanks under the shuttle, can't you? Attached it. They're heavy, they're cumbersome, and unless they get detached, the shuttle will come crashing back to Earth, wouldn't it?

But if at the right moment they get jettisoned, like on the next slide, then the shuttle is able to shoot off, isn't it, into outer space, free at last.

And that too will be our own lives at the end. We will be given new bodies, our earthly bodies will be jettisoned, as it were, so that we can keep going on with our new spiritual life.

And of course, if we haven't got that spiritual life in the first place, that is, if we're not the space shuttle, then we're just like the boosters, aren't we? That when we come to the end of our life on this Earth, we will come crashing back to Earth, as it were, without any hope for eternity.

[17 : 59] So how do we get on this shuttle that is eternal life? Because after all, didn't Jesus just say the Spirit is like the wind, it just comes and goes when it pleases? How can we be at the right place to ensure that the Spirit is blowing into our lives?

Well, you may be hanging out for this answer, and we find it in verse 19, where Jesus says, this is the verdict, or this is the conclusion.

Light, that is, Jesus himself, for we know John declares Jesus to be the light at the start of the Gospel. Light has come into the world, but people love 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 their deeds will be exposed, but whoever lives by the truth comes into the light so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

And so, friends, the truth is, whenever we open the Bible, whenever we meet Jesus and we declare the good news about Jesus, the Spirit is blowing.

[19 : 05] When you hear the good news of Jesus proclaimed, the light is being turned on in your lives, shining there.

But whether you're born of the Spirit or not depends on how you respond to that light. Do you receive Jesus and believe in Him when you hear?

If you do, then what you're doing is coming to the light because you love the truth. But if you withdraw and reject Jesus, then you are not born of the Spirit.

It's like, you know, I don't know whether you've been walking around in the dark sometimes in, probably not, but let's say you do walk around in the dark in one of the reserves and you shine a powerful searchlight into the bushes.

You know, there are lots of foxes in our suburbs, by the way, if you didn't know that. And sometimes you might see the fox get caught in your searchlight, isn't it? The two eyes just reflecting back on you.

[20 : 09] And they hate being exposed, don't they? And the moment that they see that, they often, more often than not, they scurry back into the darkness, don't they? And that is our natural response, isn't it?

Because we're sinful and we know it and yet we're proud, that's what the truth of Jesus' light does to us.

When the light of Christ first hits us, it brings a realization of just how dreadful we are. Someone just once asked, if your life, your every word and thought was projected on a blank wall at the NGV so that everyone can see how comfortable would you be?

Now, I personally would hate it. It would be, for me, the most uncomfortable and shameful thing.

The front that I put up for others to see how wonderful I am would crumble, wouldn't it?

But even if those things that you see in me are not put up, even if the things that you do not see are up there, my jealous thoughts, the evil intent I have for people I don't like, or the false impressions I keep holding of them even when it's not true, and they go up there, those are not things I'm proud of, is it?

[21 : 35] But thankfully, God doesn't do that to us, does He? He doesn't put us to shame even though He knows every detail about our lives, and they're not things to be proud of.

He does not expose us like that. Instead, when we meet Jesus, what is exposed is before God Himself, but not so that He might condemn us, but so that we might be saved.

that is, when He exposes the truth about us, what He wants us to do is to run to the light that is Jesus, and not away from it. Run to Jesus, the one who loves us, and who instead of judging and condemning us, laid down His light for us, to die for us, so that we might be saved.

But for our part, what we need to do is openly admit to God what we have done in His sight, to repent of it, to say sorry, to say, I trust in Jesus instead, and I want to live a new way.

You know, often when we are caught with our hand in the cookie jar, even after Mom and Dad says we're not allowed to have any, our natural instinct is to quickly pull the hand out of the jar, isn't it?

[22 : 53] Hide the cookie jar behind our back, and it's like, what cookie jar? There was no cookie jar, right? Pretend that nothing has happened. Well, that's not what God wants of us to do. Instead, what He wants us to do is to fess up, come into the light, live by the truth of the light, and then when we do, that's when the Spirit comes into our life, and we are born again to receive eternal life.

And so friends, if you're here today, and you haven't done this in your life before, then today's your chance to do so. Today's your chance to keep coming to the light to find out more, and then to ask the light to come into your life, the person of Jesus.

And when He does, you will be born of the Spirit, and you will find eternal life. Well, if that's what you want to do tonight, then please join with me as I say this prayer.

Say this with me in your heart. Father, thank you for sending your Son Jesus so that I can believe in Him and have eternal life.

I see now the error of my ways and my rebellion against you. Please forgive me in Christ Jesus.

Give me eternal life by being born of the Spirit.

[24 : 16] thank you for this gift and fresh start that will last forever. In the name of Jesus, my Lord and Savior, I pray.

Amen.