

A fresh start

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[0 : 00] Come, let us commit our time together to the Lord in prayer again. Let us pray. Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, we thank you again for the joy and the privilege of being called to come together in the name of the Lord Jesus this morning.

And thank you, Lord, that we have been reminded even from the songs and the prayers this morning how we are loved by you. That apart from what you have done for us, Lord Jesus, we could not have come to know you as our God and Savior.

We could not have experienced your kindness and goodness. And we thank you, Lord Jesus, that truly you are the only one who is truly God and truly man, as the children have reminded us from their presentation.

And what a privilege it is, Lord, to be known as your people. As we consider your word again this morning, looking at John chapter 3, Lord, may your spirit continue to impress your word upon our hearts.

Give us understanding. Above all, help us, Lord, in our unbelief, so that we may respond to your word of truth and life by faith and by obedience.

[1 : 24] And through our obedience, Lord, many more will come to know of your kindness and goodness. So, Lord, be with us as we commit our time together into your hands.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Some years ago, our family were on our way to Batu Feringi. Some of you know the place in Penang.

We were on our way there for a short holiday when we received a message from a friend in Penang. Massive jam in Penang.

Road to Batu Feringi closed. Tsunami warning. As we received the message, we were roughly just before Ipo, driving up from KL.

When we received the message, we all laughed in the car. Because in KL, it was bright and sunny. And our friend Stephen, we thought, he must be fooling around again.

[2 : 24] So, we text him a reply. Yeah, right. Is Ultraman and Raksasa also in Penang? But of course, you know that Stephen wasn't joking.

Soon, messages began to flood in. And we even heard it on the car radio. By the time we got to Penang, we saw it with our own eyes. Massive jams, flooded roads, damaged properties.

Penang was in chaos. We never made it to Batu Feringi. Of course, that day was December 26, 2004.

The day when a huge undersea earthquake, measuring somewhere on the Richter scale between 9.1 to 9.3, had triggered a series, not one, but a series of tsunamis in the Indian Ocean.

It became one of the deadliest natural disasters in recent history, killing more than 225,000 people. spread over 11 countries.

[3 : 29] From hindsight, authorities believed that many lives could have been saved if only we had better warning systems, if we had satellite-based national warning system, or some other form of message broadcasting system.

If only we had them, many lives could have been saved. And yet, it seems that there were some warning signs back then before the tsunamis came.

We read later in news report that some fishermen before the tsunami came reported incredible catches just the day before. Incredible quantities as well as varieties of fish that seasoned fishermen had never experienced before.

Some tourists apparently turned up at beaches and found that there was no water. There were surely signs in the sea that something was going on.

Sadly, before the tsunami, nobody understood what those signs meant, not until after the tragedy hit.

[4 : 44] But John's Gospel records that Jesus performed many signs, many miraculous signs, when he was ministering on earth. If you are familiar with John's Gospel, you know them.

Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding. How Jesus healed the sick with just a word. How Jesus even raised the dead.

But John tells us in his Gospel, this was not just amazing miracles, they were actually signs. Signs given by God to point us to something, something important, some urgent truths that God wanted to show us from what Jesus was doing.

But sadly, many failed to understand the truth behind those signs that Jesus did. Why? Because they needed Jesus to do something else for them, something more than just teaching them and showing them signs.

They needed Jesus to enable them to be born again. And that is the subject of our sermon this morning. The need to be born again.

[6 : 02] At the beginning of the chapter, in John chapter 3, verse 1, we meet Nicodemus, a man who saw the signs that Jesus did, but he couldn't understand what it all meant.

And so he came to Jesus looking for answers. Now friends, it's important to realise that Nicodemus was actually not an ordinary man himself.

He was an impressive man. He was a Pharisee, which means that he was highly respected, actually, in his community. He was a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, one of 70 men responsible for Jews all over the Roman world, which meant he was a man with great authority.

And he was also a highly respected teacher. That's why down in verse 10 in chapter 3, Jesus would call him Israel's teacher.

Not just our Sunday school teacher or just a teacher in the local church, but Israel's teacher. That's how highly he was regarded in his time.

[7 : 15] Nicodemus, he was an impressive man. And yet, Jesus told him all his credentials could not secure him a place in the kingdom of God.

Just look at what it says in verse 3. Jesus told him, very truly, I tell you, Nicodemus, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.

And yes, that includes you, Nicodemus. Now, of course, Jesus didn't mean have to go back to the mother's womb and be physically born again.

Yeah, by the way, congrats to Pastor Brian and family on the birth of Linus yesterday. Oh, not yesterday. The day before yesterday. Of course, Jesus doesn't mean that, oh, we must re-enter the mother's womb to be born again.

That's not what he was talking about. But Jesus was talking about being born of the Spirit of God. Nicodemus, as with everyone else, must experience this new birth, a spiritual new birth, as a child of God.

[8 : 34] because only those who are born of the Spirit of God can be a member of God's kingdom. Now, friends, I do not know how much you understand what that phrase means.

If you find it hard to swallow, well, you're not alone. Because even an impressive man like Nicodemus, such a learned man like Nicodemus, he couldn't understand and he couldn't accept what Jesus was saying.

Because, despite all his impressive credentials, Nicodemus, he had two problems which are common to all of us. He had an eye problem and he had a heart problem.

Well, firstly, the eye problem. You see, Nicodemus, he operated on the principle that seeing is believing. Seeing is believing.

As do many of us today, isn't it? So, we call the world we live in the real world. Because we can see. This is where we deal with real issues that we can see, that we can touch, that we can feel.

[9 : 49] Where we eat real food with real taste, which means not McDonald's. Now, that is not to say that while we live in the real world, we do not occasionally indulge in fantasies or daydreaming.

Like when we step into the world of Harry Potter, Wonder Woman, or even Bruce Willis Die Hard. That's fantasy world. We know that belongs to Hollywood, that belongs to Netflix.

Those things belong in our computer games. But when the show is over, when the movie is over, we know it's time to step back to the real world.

So what Jesus said about being born again, for many of us, that sounds like fantasy world, not real world. Yeah, it's okay to entertain those ideas from time to time, like when we're in church, when we're reading bedtime stories with our children, but when the church service is over, when we step out of the hall, it's time to step back into the real world.

Enough of this talk about being born again. That's the principle we often operate, isn't it? Seeing is believing. Real world is what we can see and touch.

[11 : 13] Nothing of this born again business. Well, Jesus responds to this I problem by clarifying two things. There's lots going on in this chapter.

We're just going to only focus on two main things. Firstly, verse 6. Jesus explains, flesh, as in the human flesh, flesh gives birth to flesh, but spirit gives birth to spirit.

Yeah, actually, in the way Jesus is saying, well, you are kind of right because the real world and the spiritual world, like oil and water, the physical and the spiritual, they do not mix.

That's what, in a sense, that Jesus is saying. And yet, at the same time, Jesus said, there's another side to the coin. It's precisely because spirit world and physical world cannot mix.

that's why we need to be born again. Born of the spirit of God. Because unless God were to grant us this new spiritual gift, we will have no place in God's kingdom, in the kingdom of Jesus.

[12 : 32] Jesus. And friends, I don't know whether you realize how significant is that. Because it means you can study the Bible as hard as you want, enroll in all the Bible overview classes and so on and so forth, and do all your homework and even sit for the exam, gather as much religious knowledge as you like, or you can do as much charity work, do as much good work to help the poor help the needy, help those who are without a land.

You can do all those things, but without God, none of those things that you do will turn you into a spiritual person.

Do you see? Because physical and spiritual, they do not mix. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but only the spirit which God alone can give, gives birth to spirit.

That's the first implication of what Jesus is saying. So on the one hand, Jesus agreed, yes, you cannot see the spirit world, but that means actually you need to realise you need that spiritual birth.

But at the same time, Jesus is also challenging the notion seeing is believing. because is that always true? That's what Jesus goes on to say in verse 8.

[14 : 05] Jesus offers an example in nature. He compared the reality of spiritual birth to the reality of the wind. We all enjoy a cool breeze.

Jesus says, the wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear a sound, in fact, you can feel the wind, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.

So it is with everyone born of the spirit. The simple point is this, can you see the wind? Can you see it coming?

Can you see it going? Can you control it's coming and going? No. But would anyone here in this hall seriously doubt that the wind is real just because you can't see or control it?

Of course not. You can say the same thing about gravity, isn't it? That's another example we often refer to. In physics, we learn that you take a rock, a spinning rock, and if the rock is large enough, that spinning rock can generate a force strong enough to pull things towards itself.

[15 : 20] That's how planets remain in orbit. That's called gravity. Honestly, how it works, even though I was trained as an engineer, is still a mystery to me.

But even though I can't fully understand the concept of gravity, even if I cannot see gravity at work even now, I would be a fool, isn't it, to try to challenge the law of gravity.

So when Jesus tells us we need to be born again, just because we cannot see or we cannot fully understand what does it mean to be born again of the Spirit, surely we cannot just conclude, therefore it cannot be real.

Do you see the I problem that we have if we continue to insist seeing is believing as far as when it comes to spiritual matters? So that's the first problem that Jesus was addressing, the I problem.

Unfortunately, while I hope it makes some sense with some explanation, but for Nicodemus, again a man of great learning, even after Jesus explained all these things which he could not dispute, still he could not understand.

[16 : 44] He couldn't understand what Jesus was saying to him. Because Nicodemus, like all of us, he had another problem, problem number two. He doesn't only have an eye problem, he also has a problem of the heart.

Again, let's look at how Jesus diagnosed his problem in verse 11. Jesus again said very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, we testify to what we have seen, but still, you people, you 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?

Do you notice the key word that Jesus was emphasizing? The bottom line is this, why couldn't Nicodemus understand what Jesus was saying?

Why couldn't he accept them? Because he simply could not, he simply would not accept those things because of his unbelieving heart.

[18 : 01] That's a huge problem, problem number two that he had, an unbelieving heart. Now, don't get me wrong, it's not as if Nicodemus rejected everything about Jesus.

Nicodemus, after all, recognized, noticed, that God was with Jesus, otherwise, Jesus couldn't have done all those miraculous signs. He was prepared to give Jesus that. But, like most Jews in his time, Nicodemus still wanted to be able to pick and choose.

He wanted to pick and choose what suited him. And what he couldn't agree with, he just chucked it out. In other words, who has the final say, what to believe?

Nicodemus, not Jesus. He still had the final say, what I will believe. And that is the symptom of an unbelieving heart.

And we see it again and again throughout John's Gospel. Many people who saw the miraculous signs that Jesus did, some of them experienced and tasted the miraculous food that Jesus provided for them, and because of what they experienced and saw, they followed Jesus for a time.

[19 : 22] But when Jesus began to explain to them what all those signs meant, when he began to teach them what the signs really mean, what it required of them, they stopped following.

One by one, they turned their back against Jesus. Why? Because they needed more signs? No.

Because they have a problem here. They have a hard problem. They had an ingrained unbelief that refused to accept what Jesus was teaching them.

Can you detect this hard problem in yourself, friends? What is your attitude towards God this morning, this week?

What is your attitude towards the Bible, or even what you hear from the church here? do you find yourself, I like that part, yeah, I'll accept that.

[20 : 29] Hmm, that part, hmm, no, surely that cannot be what the pastor meant. Do you pick and choose what you will believe and throw out other things that is rather inconvenient for you?

does that describe how you respond to what you read and hear from the Bible, even today? Well, Jesus knew what was in Nicodemus' heart, just as the Lord Jesus also knows what is in all our hearts.

Nothing less than a new heart is needed. If anyone, Nicodemus back then or any of us today, nothing short of a new heart is required if we were to stop refusing Jesus and begin to accept the truth of Jesus.

We need a fresh start that only God can provide. We need to be born again, born again of the Spirit which only Jesus can give.

Which leads to the question, how can we experience this new start, new beginning? How can we be born again? Is there something we can do in order to be born again?

[22 : 02] Many people have asked that question, what must I do? do? Well, we don't have to guess because the answer is also provided by Jesus. Look in verse 14.

Interesting, isn't it? Jesus referred Nicodemus, an Old Testament expert, to a story that he's very familiar with. Verse 14, Jesus reminded Nicodemus, just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.

This was a famous incident back in Old Testament time, after the Exodus. You can read about it in Numbers chapter 21. It was a time when God's people in the wilderness were grumbling against God and Moses.

And in response, God sent poisonous snake among them to punish them. And many of God's people died, bitten by the poisonous snake.

But as they prayed for forgiveness, God told Moses, hang a bronze snake on a pole so that anyone who is bitten by the poisonous snake, all they have to do is look up at the bronze snake that was hung up on the pole.

[23 : 30] Just look at it. And by just looking at the bronze snake, God will bring healing to those who were bitten by the snake. Well, Jesus says, in the same way, Jesus, the Son of Man, he must also be lifted up on a pole on the cross.

And like the bronze snake, Jesus had to hang on the cross so that everyone who look at him, who is hung on the cross, everyone who look at him can be born again and have eternal life.

What you need to do is not what you do for yourself, but to look at Jesus and to trust in what he has accomplished for you, the Saviour, the God who was hung on the cross for you and for me.

And it was explained in verse 16, 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.

you see friends, Jesus meant every single word when he said you must be born again. There's no other way. And the fact that born again also suggests that there's also nothing you can do because you are dependent on someone to be born.

[25 : 11] And in this case, you are fully dependent on what God would do for you by his spirit. and this truth, Jesus was explaining to Nicodemus, he really meant it because this truth would cost him his own life.

Because Jesus knew only his death could pay the full price for the penalty of our sins. Only his death on the cross, him becoming a curse for us, could bring us God's forgiveness.

forgiveness. And by looking to the crucified Saviour, we can be born again. Many of us, like Nicodemus, think that Jesus is just a good teacher.

So if we want to sing O Holy Night in Christmas, not allowed. If we sing Jesus a wonderful teacher, of course, any time. We can accept Jesus as a good teacher.

But not who he claimed, what he had to come to do for us. But John chapter 3 makes it very clear. Jesus came to do more than just teaching God's word or even do another miraculous signs.

[26 : 33] He came to offer up his own life, to take upon himself the punishment for our sins, once and for all, so that those who trust in him will no longer have to be fearful of God's judgment, but are born again.

You can enjoy a new beginning as a spiritual child of God, as the citizen of his eternal kingdom. That is the wonderful truth of the gospel.

the truth of the gospel that demands us to accept Jesus for nothing less than all that he truly is.

It's hard, isn't it, when people tell us that we have an eye problem, and not only an eye problem, but we also have a heart problem, ingrained unbelief. It's offensive, isn't it?

Imagine how humbling it would have been for Nicodemus, Israel's teacher, to be told he had to be born again. And yet, even one as great as Nicodemus, he needed to hear this, and he needed to respond to these words from the Lord Jesus Christ.

[27 : 57] But did Jesus say all those things to shame him? No. Jesus said all this because he loved him. Remember John 3.16, for God so loved the world.

Jesus loved Nicodemus and all of us enough to tell us the truth that we don't want to hear, not to shame anyone, but to show us the only way out of our huge problem, the only way we can all experience this fresh start from God.

God has no time to beat around the bush with us. He's here to sort out our problem once and for all. And Jesus has done it.

He's done it by being hung on the cross so that all who look on Jesus on the cross, as we look at him, we can live and enjoy everlasting life through faith in Jesus, which leaves only one thing for us to do.

We must see Jesus for who he truly is, not just a great teacher, but a son of God. And we must listen to him, trust no longer on our own terms, picking and choosing what we will believe, but on his terms, trusting in what he has done for us and what it means for us in order to receive God's gift of eternal life, in order to receive the good news that all can have this fresh start through Jesus.

[29 : 56] We began by considering how warning signs could have saved lives in the 2004 tsunami if only people had the warnings.

Well, imagine with me for a moment, if we are all able to travel back in time to 2004, we were able to all go to a fishing village the day before the tsunami.

me. As you walk into the village, you saw everyone was celebrating. Why were they celebrating? Because the fishermen had just returned from the sea with the most incredible catch in their lifetime.

Amazing amount of fish, amazing variety of fish. They were all celebrating. as far they were concerned, it was the best day of their life. But as you walk into the fishing village, you know better, isn't it?

So you quickly run and start yelling to everybody, everybody quickly get out, get out, leave everything behind. This is a terrible sign. It's a sign that a tsunami is coming.

[31 : 03] Everybody get out. How do you think the villagers will respond to you? Are they going to, oh, let's leave all the fishes behind, let's pack, forget even packing our bags, let's just run and run up to the hills.

Do you think they're going to do that? Or do you think they're just going to, what's this lunatic shouting about? No, no, no, let's unload the fishing boats, let's go to the sea again, let's hope for another miraculous catch in the sea.

Don't you think that's what they're going to do? You see, friends, at the end of the day, what we need from God is not more warning signs.

Our problem is here. Our issue is ingrained unbelief. We simply would not accept the implications of what God is trying to show us.

What we really need is a new heart. A new heart that will finally be able to accept the truth from God. A new heart that only God can give so that we can respond no longer in unbelief but to respond by trusting in Jesus and to be born again.

[32 : 26] This is the fresh start we all need from God. And here's the good news. Everyone who look at the cross and believe in Jesus and confess him as Lord and Saviour God say this gift is yours.

So the question for all of us this morning here or online is this have you asked Jesus for this gift? if not will you receive this fresh start that God is offering you in Jesus so that Jesus will be more than just a religious teacher to you but you will know him as your God and as your Saviour.

dear friends what is God saying to you this morning? Can I invite you now to respond to him by praying? Can I invite you to first of all pray on your own?

How is God speaking to you from his word? What is the Lord Jesus saying to you? I'm going to give you just a moment to respond in prayer and after a while I will lead us all to pray together.

Come let us do that. Thank you.

[34 : 14] Thank you.

Let us continue to pray. Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, we thank you this morning again for your word to us.

Thank you, Lord, that you love each and every one of us. That your desire is that none of us remain, Lord, in our issues, in our own troubles, whatever our predicament may be.

But, Lord, you long that all of us will come to experience your kindness and your goodness, especially your kindness and goodness towards us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you came. You came teaching us. You came giving us all kinds of wonderful, miraculous signs to show us that you are indeed from God.

[35 : 52] But more than that, you came to offer us indeed something that we know, that we don't know, but you know that we really need from you.

A fresh start. The gift of your Spirit to give us a new birth, so that we can respond to your truths and your signs by trust and by obedience.

O Lord, indeed, we ask for your forgiveness. How often we continue to be so slow to respond to your kindness. But, Father, we pray that you will be merciful towards us.

Help us not to continue to harden our heart against you, not to continue in our unbelief, but to receive this gift from you and to allow your Spirit to renew our hearts afresh so that we will grow in understanding more of your love and we can grow also in trusting you, in our confidence in you and in our obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ.

O Lord, help us in our unbelief so that all will see our progress and give praise and thanks to you, our Heavenly Father, so that more will also see the love of Jesus in our lives and more will know that we are your disciples and more will come to know him as their Lord and Saviour.

[37 : 33] Again, Lord, we ask for your mercy on ourselves, our families, indeed, our neighbours here in Kuching. Indeed, we pray that this Christmas season, even as many continue to refuse the Gospel of Lord Jesus, may your mercy overflow, especially in this Christmas season.

thank you, O Lord, for your kindness. Thank you for your patience. We give you thanks in Jesus' name. Amen.