

A new start

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[0 : 0 0] Well, again, a very warm welcome this afternoon. It's great to see you all, great to be with you all. We have, or rather I have, the joy of preaching from one of my favorite passages in the whole Bible today. It's quite a powerful one, and in a moment we'll turn to that, but first let's pray for God's help before we look at it. Lord God, we pray that you will help us today by the power of your Spirit to understand these words which we read, and not just to understand them in our minds, but we pray that these words would go deep into our hearts and change us, that you would show us the reality of real faith, and even more, the wonderful miracle that you do in those who follow you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Now we're going to turn to John chapter 2, verse 23. That's page 887, if you have one of the church Bibles. John chapter 2, on page 887. John chapter 2, starting reading at verse 23, in the end of the chapter. Now, when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, and we're talking about Jesus here, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus, on his part, did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people, and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what is in man. Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him. Jesus answered him, truly, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus said to him, how can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Jesus answered, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of flesh is flesh. And that which is born of the spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born again.

The wind blows where it wishes and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit. Nicodemus said to him, how can these things be? Jesus answered him, are you the teacher of Israel? And yet you do not understand these things.

Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the son of man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the son of man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

[4 : 1 9] Now, this passage begins in a pretty unsettling way. If you look at verses 23 to 25, Jesus tells us from the off that not all faith is in Jesus's sight, real faith.

We left Jesus last week in Jerusalem during the great Passover feast. The city is full of people. And in these verses, we see what those people's response to him was. They see the signs, they see his miracles, and it says they believe in him. But Jesus, it says in verse 24, did not entrust himself to them, for he himself knew what was in man. And this is the beginning of a great theme that will run all through this gospel. Jesus can see past their words. He can see past the smiles.

He doesn't need anyone to tell him what you or I are like, because he knows. And what he saw when he looked at these people who had, in a sense, believed in him, was that the faith they showed him was not real. And as we will find as we go through the gospel, their belief is superficial. It doesn't result in any transformation of their lives. And they certainly wouldn't make any big sacrifices for it.

It wasn't, in other words, real faith at all. But that is unsettling. There are people, and perhaps that includes some of us here in this room, who have a kind of faith, maybe think of ourselves as Christians, and yet are not. Perhaps we don't have this real faith that Jesus wants to see. And we've got to ask ourselves, is that me or is that you? And the reality is that there are an awful lot of very strange ideas in our culture floating about, about what real faith is.

And if we're going to take life seriously, we need to examine what Jesus Christ says real faith is.

[6 : 40] We've got to at least show the respect of asking what he means when he talks about it. Unfortunately for us, John gives us a real-life example, a worked example, of someone like this who doesn't have real faith. Someone who comes to Jesus, and Jesus guides them through to show them what real faith will be for them, what it really is. And he makes it absolutely clear that in every way, the Christian faith revolves around what God does for us, what he does in Jesus Christ.

Not about what we do, not about living a good life, not about pulling yourself up by your bootstraps, but about an absolute miracle that God is willing to do in our lives. We'll see that in three sections.

Firstly, real faith means being born again. And we see that in one to eight. Then real faith means listening to Jesus. That's verse nine to 13. And then finally, 14 and 15, real faith means trusting in Jesus's death for us. So firstly, real faith means being born again. You see in verse one, there's this man, Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus. And we know he's an example of what we've just been talking about because verse chapter two ends with, he didn't need anyone to bear witness about what was in man because he knew what was in man. And then chapter three goes on and says, there was a man.

Here's an example, a man. And he comes to Jesus and he's a Pharisee. In other words, he's someone who knows his Bible really well. He puts it into practice and he's a ruler of the Jews. He's part of the ruling council, the government underneath the Roman occupier. Jesus will even call him in verse nine, the teacher of Israel. This is in other words, someone who has risen as far as you can go in that society. He's at the very least a moderator or since he's involved in the government as well, perhaps he's a bit more like an archbishop who also sits in the house of Lords and teaches theology.

If anyone deserves to be in heaven in the view of the people of that time, this is the guy. And he comes, it's nighttime. He's not too anxious, like probably to let others know. He takes this guy from Galilee seriously. It's very, very common, isn't it? With people who are investigating Christianity for the first time, it's easy to be reluctant to be seen investigating it. And that's him. And he comes and he says, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him. That's a kind of faith, isn't it? You know, it's a little condescending. We, the people who really know, we can see that you're the real thing. But he does see that Jesus does miracles. He does see he comes from God. He does see he's a teacher, a prophet perhaps.

[9 : 51] And because this man is being honest, Jesus is absolutely straight with him. You see that in verse three? Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

He's not messing around, is he? The kingdom of God was the whole point of Nicodemus' religion. He was looking forward to that wonderful day when God's Messiah would come, sweep away evil and establish peace and joy for all God's people. And Jesus says, Nicodemus, you haven't even bought yourself a ticket there yet, let alone being on the way. There's something that has to happen to you right now, Nicodemus, to you and every person who wants to be there, whether that person's a drug addict in the gutter or a respected preacher and teacher like Nicodemus. It does not matter, Nicodemus, how moral you are, how religious you are, how decent you are. It doesn't matter if you're a great citizen. You must be born again. There is no other way or method or hope. But what does that mean?

Nicodemus is pretty confused. How can a man be born again when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? And in our day, there are plenty odd and distorted ideas of what it means to be born again. Often we just use it as a sort of throwaway comment. But to Nicodemus, who knew his Bible really well, it should probably have been clear. That's why Jesus will talk the way he does. Are you a teacher of Israel and you don't understand these things? Because Jesus' words refer very clearly to the Old Testament, to many, many passages in it, which talk about, on the one hand, our need to be washed clean of our guilt, that water washes dirt off a body, and on the other, to have our hearts changed from the inside so that we can love what is good instead of living selfishly for ourselves. Now, the clearest of all of them, probably, is Ezekiel 36. Now, just let me read you a few words from there. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness. And I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

Now, just like Jesus' words, that's a promise with two halves. Be washed by God from our sin, sprinkled with water, and be given new hearts, new spirits, so that we can live for him.

We are, in other words, guilty on the one hand, stained by the guilt of our sin, our selfishness, our rejection of God, all our self-absorption, and the countless other ways we do wrong.

[12 : 53] And God's new kingdom will not include the guilty. And so there is only hope if God himself will wash us clean. We need him to do that. We need him to act.

We need him to get us ready. And that, of course, is what baptism has always symbolized. It's the way God himself will come and wash us clean, so that we are reborn, born, in Jesus' words, of water.

But that still isn't enough. Because however clean we are, we're still our old selves. Even if the guilt is gone, the future is full of many more opportunities to do wrong, and our hearts are selfish by nature.

You know, constant goodness and kindness and patience does not come naturally to us, especially when we're under pressure. Just ask my kids when I'm trying to get them out of school, out in the morning for school.

If we are to enter the kingdom of God, we must be born of the Spirit.

[14 : 04] And that's what Ezekiel was talking about when he said he will give us a new heart and put a new spirit within us. Take away those hard, callous hearts of ours that don't listen to what's good and always look to ourselves, and instead give us hearts of flesh, sensitive hearts that can feel again, that can relate to God again, that can love our neighbor again.

And Jesus says, that which is born of flesh is flesh, but that which is born of spirit is spirit. If you, a fading, fleshly, mortal, doomed to die, are going to see the kingdom of God, you need to be spiritually alive, born of the Spirit.

And Jesus is saying, unless this happens to us, you cannot see the kingdom of God. You cannot enter it. Unless he does this incredible miracle in you.

Because that is what Christianity is about. It is not a set of beliefs merely. It is not a set of behaviors and nothing more. It's a miracle that God does for us.

And in verses 7 and 8, and we'll just cover these ones very briefly, Jesus shows us how to tell if we're born again. The Spirit of God, he says, is like the wind. You can't see where he's coming from or where he's going.

[15 : 24] But you can see his work. You know, you have no idea what hill that wind has just blown over, but you can see the trees bend to its power. That's how you tell if someone is born again.

Have they been bent to the power of God? Have they been humbled, reshaped? Not necessarily that the life is completely transformed, but at the very least, they are no longer bowing to the pressures of this world or to our own egos, but instead that there is something at work that changes our life in a way that you can't explain by just the normal pressures of daily life.

Something real and clear has happened. Real faith means being born again. Now, secondly, real faith means listening to Jesus.

That may seem a little more obvious, but Jesus is saying something pretty deep here as well. Look at verse 9. Nicodemus is still completely confused. How can these things be?

And Jesus tells him off. You've seen that already. You claim to be a teacher. These aren't new ideas. This is basic biblical faith. But Jesus goes on, verse 11.

[16 : 36] We speak of what we know, and we bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. That's the problem with Nicodemus' faith.

He's willing to consider some new ideas from Jesus, but he's not treating it as evidence, as testimony straight from heaven itself. You remember Nicodemus has said, we know that you're a teacher come from God.

And perhaps there's an edge, a slight edge of sarcasm in Jesus' words to make Nicodemus really think, well, we know some things too. In fact, we have come from heaven.

We are telling you things, in other words, that we know firsthand. Your problem, Nicodemus, is not a difficulty of understanding in your head. It's not a difficulty of intellect.

It's will you trust my words? You know, no one else has gone up to heaven to find out what goes on there and come back to tell us whatever some books and Christian bookshops will claim they have done.

[17 : 42] But I'm from there, Nicodemus. You need to believe me. Real faith is taking on board this testimony, this evidence, because my teaching is evidence straight from heaven.

And there is no other way to know about these things. There is no other way. Real faith means listening to Jesus.

And then finally, 14 and 15. Real faith means trusting that Jesus has died for you. These are slightly cryptic verses in a way.

But again, Jesus is relying on the fact that this man, Nicodemus, knows his Old Testament, his Bible, really well. So he's putting it across in a kind of shorthand so that Nicodemus can really grasp what he's talking about.

Verse 14. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

[18 : 47] Now, the Son of Man is Jesus' way of referring to himself in the Gospels. And he, he says, must be lifted up. Now, in their language, that was a way of talking about being crucified.

But that's what it means is made much clearer by the reference to Moses. Jesus is looking back to the old, old story of God's people long before in the wilderness.

They'd been in slavery in Egypt and God had rescued them, was leading them to a new home of peace and plenty. But right in the middle of that, they rebel against him. They're full of bitterness and moaning.

It's a little like a slave on the Underground Railroad in the days of the American South, stopping halfway and complaining about the food. This wasn't quite what I was looking forward to on the way to freedom.

It's that sort of bizarre, strange complaint at the very point when they're being given everything back. They were rebels at that moment against God, sinners like all humanity.

[19 : 56] And God punished them. He sent snakes that bit them. He gave them a hot, raging fever and pain. And the people realize what they've done. And they ask Moses to take away these snakes.

They say, we're sorry, we have done wrong. But instead of just straightforwardly taking it away, God tells Moses, I want you to do something, something symbolic, something that will really show what's going on.

He says, make a bronze statue of a snake. A snake's an ancient symbol of evil in so many cultures, isn't it? Make a symbol of a snake and put it up on a stick.

You know, what those charming ancient cultures did to executed criminals. Get them up there in a spike where you can see them, like Edward I did to William Wallace.

And everyone who looks at that snake, when they look at it, just look, that's all, just look, they will live, they'll be healed. If they trust God enough, in other words, to look up at the snake, he'll take away his anger.

[20 : 57] He'll deal with the evil and they will live. It's not much, it's not demanding, but it reminds them you must come in faith to God who will sort things out for you.

He will rescue you from evil. Now, we've already thought briefly about the fact that we are sinners and God punishes sin. And Jesus is saying to Nicodemus and to all of us, you are under God's anger.

You are under sentence. And God punishes rebellion and pride and hatred. But God himself provides a solution. He says, just like the snake was lifted up, that was a symbol of me.

I will be high and lifted up. And you, Nicodemus, you must look to me on the cross there. And then if you do that, you will have life, just like they did in the desert, but not a brief healing like they had.

Eternal life, verse 15. Whoever looks will have eternal life. Whoever believes in me may have eternal life.

[22 : 03] Just to quote another Old Testament prophet Isaiah that, again, Nicodemus would have known well. It talks of God sending a servant who will be high and lifted up.

And it says, he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the punishment that brought us peace.

Real faith means trusting in Jesus' death to take away our sins. To take away all God's anger that we can live.

There's a lot in this short passage, isn't there? You see why John puts it at the beginning, near the beginning of his gospel, all the reality of faith in Christ is drawn together in this short, short conversation.

He's saying, Nicodemus, you know, you're a model of what a person should be in so many ways. But you and everyone else, good or bad, they need to come to Jesus.

[23 : 13] They need to come, he says to me. They need to come to be born again, to be remade from the inside, to be washed clean. They need to come so that they can know the realities, the heavenly realities that only Jesus can speak of.

And they need to come to trust in the cross of Jesus Christ by which he gives us complete forgiveness and life. real faith.

Real faith trusts God to do everything, everything through Jesus Christ so that we can live. He doesn't leave us to depend on ourselves in any way.

So Jesus is saying, come, come to me and I will do everything to rescue you. Let's end with a prayer.

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you did come and that you, the only one who has come from heaven, have come and told us about these things that we could not know otherwise.

[24 : 31] And that you, through that, have shown us that God in his kindness and you in your love do everything for us.

Everything. And we pray that you would give us the real faith that trusts in you for that. Not just to be a miracle worker, not just to be a wise teacher, but the one who saves and rescues us in every way.

We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.