

A New Beginning

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[0 : 00] So, another year over and another just begun. A time to review and take stock. A time to reflect on the year that was and look forward to the year to come.

A time when we think about all that has happened and think about all that we would like to happen in the coming months. It's a time when we make resolutions, isn't it? When we look at areas of our life which we desire to see change in.

When we approach our dissatisfaction with ourselves head on and make grand plans to grow in particular areas of our life and particular directions.

Eat healthier. Eat less. Exercise more. Watch less TV. Cut down on social media. Read more. Live more ethically. Take up a new pastime. Be more adventurous.

Be kinder. Be more generous. Pray more. Spend more time in God's word. A few select examples that we might be thinking of. Having such resolutions is no bad thing.

[0 : 58] In fact, I think there's a lot of wisdom to it. A new year marks a good time to make a renewed effort at character development and character change. We all know the usual pattern, don't we?

We're motivated in January and then back to feeling flat in February. Within a month, all our best laid plans have gone awry. Part of the problem is we hope to be sustained by our own willpower. Which, if we know ourselves, can be rather weak and fickle. But change can be possible. And it's helpful to think about change because it's something the Bible speaks about a lot.

The Bible speaks often about change. It makes the case that change is necessary for all people because we are all sinners. And the Bible speaks often about growth.

It makes the case that growth is necessary for all Christians because we need to be growing in faith. Growing in understanding and growing in holiness. And the Bible speaks often about new beginnings.

[1 : 57] And that's the overarching theme of our time together this afternoon. Because in Christ, a new beginning is possible. So, whether you wouldn't call yourself a Christian but you'd love a fresh start.

Or you've been a Christian for years but you're feeling spiritually deflated and low as we start this new year. In need of a fresh burst of energy.

Well, there's hope in the simple gospel message of Jesus. And that's what we're going to think about for the next half an hour or so. So, coming off the back of Christmas, we're going to look at the very start of Jesus' earthly ministry.

Because in it, we find a summary of the simple gospel. And a blueprint for strong foundations of change and growth. We have three points this afternoon.

Or three steps, if you like, in building strong foundations. The first step is repentance. Before Jesus began his public ministry.

[2 : 58] Healing, teaching, and proclaiming the kingdom of heaven. His cousin John was preparing the way for him. He was preparing the way by preaching a baptism of repentance.

Matthew tells us this in verse 1. In those days, John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

But what is repentance? Well, repentance at its heart is all about change. Repentance begins with a recognition of our sin.

That is, that we think thoughts that we ought not to think. We say things we ought not to say. We perform actions we ought not to perform. We avoid actions that we ought to be doing.

We lie. We hurt others. We hurt ourselves. We don't love others as we should. And chiefly, we reject God and we reject his rightful rule.

[4 : 00] So repentance begins with a recognition that this is who we are. We are broken, sinful people. We are not what we ought to be. We are rebels and we are lost.

And what repentance is, is it's an active decision not to continue to pursue a life marked by sin. It's a changed mind which leads to changed actions and a changed direction.

A recognition that we have rejected God and sinned against him and now want to say sorry and start living for him. A radical transformation rooted in grief and sin.

And a longing to live anew for God. And that's what John the Baptist was teaching. And this is why he was baptizing in the River Jordan.

Matthew tells us that people went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the River Jordan.

[5 : 04] Now baptism itself wasn't commanded in the Old Testament. But ceremonial washing of uncleanness was. And there are certainly echoes of that in John's baptism. Interestingly, Jewish rabbis, they would baptize non-Jewish converts to Judaism.

But never ever would an ethnic Jew be baptized like that. So what's really interesting is that John was baptizing Jews. It's as if he's saying that God's people have wandered far, far away from God. And need to be baptized back into his covenant community. As if they were non-Jews believing in God for the very first time. John's baptism is about a fresh start for God's people built on a foundation of repentance.

And he was teaching this fresh start baptism because Jesus was about to arrive on the scene. In all four gospel accounts, John is presented as the forerunner of Jesus.

He is the messenger who runs ahead of the king to tell his subjects that the sovereign is on his way. And then the people need to prepare themselves for the king's arrival.

[6 : 21] Isaiah has spoken of him and his role. As Matthew says, this is the one who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah. A voice of one calling in the wilderness. Prepare the way for the Lord.

Make straight paths for him. And so here is John. A voice in the wilderness of Judea. Preparing the ground for Jesus' arrival.

With a baptism of repentance. And John's role as the herald of the king meant his work and look was very different to Jesus. John's clothes were made of camel's hair, Matthew tells us.

And he had a leather belt around his waist. And his food was locusts and wild honey. His food is the food of poverty. The food of the desert. And the clothes he wore pointed to his role as a second Elijah.

Because the Old Testament prophet Elijah wore clothes of camel's hair tied together with a leather belt. Because it had been promised that Elijah would come again before the Messiah came on the scene.

[7 : 21] And so he did. John the Baptist was a new Elijah. Preparing the way for the king. And a new beginning for the king's people. John's baptism of repentance illustrates a few fundamentals that at the start of a new year are really good and really helpful to revisit.

Firstly, sin is the deepest problem with humanity. It's why there's so much discord and division amongst people. It's why we behave in such selfish ways.

It's why we often pursue our own pleasure above all else. It's why we often feel flat and feel that our lives are going nowhere. It's why the world seems constantly stuck in cycles of violence and foolishness and cruelty and grief and death.

It's why things aren't as they ought to be in the world. And it's why we ourselves aren't as we ought to be. Our sin, our rejection of God and our pursuit of our own desires, values and principles.

That is the root problem in our lives and in our world. Second, the right response to sin is repentance.

[8 : 44] We all know no one likes to come tail between their legs and admit to being in the wrong. We all know this. From school children to politicians, trying to get a genuine apology from people is often like trying to draw blood from a stone.

We don't like admitting that we're wrong, do we? And I suspect that we like even less to admit that we are complete and total moral failures. But because of our sin, that's where we are.

But taking that step is hugely important. Coming to God and saying sorry for our sin, that's the first big step in following him. And it's a step that we keep taking.

Our sins can be forgiven and are forgiven in Christ, but repentance is a mainstay of the Christian life. When we sin, we repent and God forgives. It's an essential foundational act.

And when we forget the centrality of repentance, well, we become like the religious leaders of John and Jesus' day, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. And this leads us to step two in our blueprint for strong foundation.

[9 : 55] And step two is beware presumption. Beware presumption. Because presumption was the fatal flaw of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

They presumed that they didn't need to repent, or at the very least, they didn't see that sin was as much a problem in their lives as it was a problem in the lives of the cheating tax collector or the prostitutes who they would haughtily look down on.

Now, they come to see John's baptism. It's not clear if they're coming to be baptized or if they're just coming to watch proceedings out of curiosity. Nevertheless, their appearance drew pretty strong words from the Baptist.

Matthew writes, So John's pulling no punches here.

In calling them a brood of vipers, he is accusing them of being the children of the serpent, children of the devil, the enemy of the world who tempted Adam and Eve into the first act of sin.

[11 : 02] It's a pretty bold move to accuse the religious fathers of Israel and suggest that their father is, in fact, not God, but the serpent. And John asks them, who warned them that they needed to flee the coming wrath?

Who warned them that they, too, needed to repent of their sin and turn to God afresh? Who warned them that they need to repent of their sin. They need to repent of their sin and their lack of true repentance.

John says, produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father. So I tell you that out of these stones, God can raise up children for Abraham.

The axe has been laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. They're like dead trees.

They haven't produced fruit. What John is saying is that true repentance produces fruit. Changed lives marked by love and joy and peace, by patience and kindness and goodness, by faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

[12 : 26] But that's not the trees of the Pharisees. Their trees are barren and lifeless. And John warns them not to presume that their heritage will save them.

They may be sons of Abraham, but God can raise up children for Abraham from anywhere, as indeed he did when the gospel went out to non-Jews, which most of us, I assume, are.

And if the Pharisees and Sadducees don't abandon their presumption and their arrogance, assuming that sin isn't really a problem for them, and assuming that God will accept them as they are, well, then the axe is going to fall upon them and turn their lifeless trees to stumps and their wood to fuel for the fire.

Because Jesus is on his way. The king is coming to his people. And what does he bring with him? He brings fire. Fire is a fascinating thing, isn't it?

This is going to make me sound a bit like a pyromaniac, but don't you just love the way the flames of fire dance and flow when you're standing around a bonfire, or you're sitting around the fire at home if you have a fireplace?

[13 : 34] There's something wonderfully elemental and mysterious about fire. The fire is powerful. The fire purifies. The fire destroys. The fire is both a blessing, bringing heat and light, and a curse, bringing devastation and destruction.

John tells those gathered by the river, I baptize you with water for repentance, but after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. John's baptism with water for repentance lays the foundation for the king, but the king brings an even better baptism.

With Jesus, the very Holy Spirit of God comes upon you, and the fire of his holiness purifies and changes you.

The fire represents the way in which the Holy Spirit rewrites us, helping those who follow Jesus to reject sin and pursue righteousness.

[14 : 44] That is, living in the way God wants us to live. And this is only possible with the purifying power of God's spirit that Jesus brings.

But let us not forget that destructive element of fire. John continues. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

For those like the Pharisees and the Sadducees, withered husks who produce no fruit of repentance, there is only the fire that destroys, because there is nothing there to purify. And so presumption is a dangerous place, but regrettably, it's also the natural disposition of our culture. Because culture says, doesn't it, if there is a God, well, he wouldn't judge a decent person like me.

And if he did, well, then he's a heartless piece of work, and I wouldn't want to follow him anyway. In our age of infinite choice, we want the right to choose what we think God must be like.

[15:56] Instead of recognizing that we are made in God's image, we want a God that's made in ours. We want, as Depeche Mode sang, our own personal Jesus. Tailor-made to our particular sensibilities, just like an algorithm.

Because the real Jesus might challenge our preconceptions, and force us to question the comfortable psychological bubble that we build for ourselves. But God is not a creature of our creation.

We are creatures of his. If there is a God, we must not presume that he's the God we have imagined up. And we mustn't be so arrogant to assume that he'll forgive us, especially when we don't have any sort of relationship with him, or even want to have any sort of relationship with him. And it's worth noting that in a culture of presumption like ours, it's very easy for Christians, too, to slide down a slippery slope into our own particular presumptions.

After all, let's remember that the Pharisees and the Sadducees were religious leaders. They'd started from the right place, but they'd ended up in the wrong one through an attitude of arrogance and pride.

[17:12] And so the Christian can never forget that he or she is a sinner. But too often, I think, Christians can be in danger of an arrogance that looks down upon people because of their life choices.

We need to remember, we are sinners in a world of sinners. Any good we have ourselves, well, that comes from Christ and from the purifying power of his baptism, the purifying power of the Holy Spirit.

We've no right to look down on others with a disapproving and haughty eye. No, instead, like John and like Jesus and like Paul and countless others that we see in the Bible, we need to get down amongst those who are lost and lead them to the waters of life by the hand in love and in grace and in compassion and mercy.

Because, well, we were once as they are, without Christ and without hope. If you've been following the trial of Ghislaine Maxwell in the news, you'll know that the jury declared her guilty of sex trafficking.

And I saw on Twitter one commentator who was incredulous that another journalist could feel any pity for Maxwell. And as Christians, whilst we couldn't recognize the horrific depths of depravity and evil that men and women can and do commit, I think we must never be without pity.

[18:36] Our culture is incredibly pharisaical in that way, full of self-righteousness and a presumption, always looking down on those who are obviously in the wrong, obviously evil, with a sense of moral superiority and a presumption of our own decency.

But as Christians, well, we know that we are sinners. So we must have pity for even the worst of sinners. Because while sin without repentance is fatal, well, so is presumption.

Now what really brings everything together in our final, is our final step in the blueprint. So repentance is essential. Presumption, well, it's a fatal danger that must be avoided.

But without Jesus, our repentance will not bear fruit and we will slide back into presumption. So knowing Jesus is our third step.

John came to prepare the way for Jesus and it's in repenting and knowing Jesus that our foundations take shape and enable us to change.

[19:46] When we repent and recognize Jesus for who he is, the son of God and the savior of the world, then we will be bathed in the fire of his baptism, receive the Holy Spirit and be enabled to live in Christ and live for Christ.

But we must know who he is first. So long as Jesus remains a stranger, we are lost. But thankfully, Jesus came to seek and to save the lost.

Matthew tells us what happened when Jesus appeared. Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him saying, I need to be baptized by you and do you come to me?

Jesus replied, let it be so now. It is proper for us to do this, to fulfill all righteousness. Then John consented. So Jesus is not being baptized for repentance.

He doesn't need to repent. But he does it to fulfill all righteousness. That is, his baptism is a declaration of his righteousness. And it's a mark of solidarity with his people who he has come to save.

[20 : 58] John's baptism of repentance was laying the foundations for faith in Christ. And it was pointing towards Christ and that greater baptism that he came to bring in the Holy Spirit.

And so it is only fitting then that the one who is being pointed towards, Jesus, expresses arrival by going under the waters and rising with a declaration of who he is.

And what a declaration. Who is Jesus? This is Jesus. Matthew tells us, as soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. And at that moment, heaven was opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

And a voice from heaven said, this is my Son whom I love. With him, I am well pleased. This is Jesus.

God the Father speaks from heaven and declares that Jesus is the beloved Son with whom he is pleased. And the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is present, marking further Jesus' divinity.

[22 : 08] Who is Jesus? He is God. God the Son who came to earth to lead us back to the Father through the Holy Spirit. And in showing us this moment, Matthew wants us to be in no doubt whatsoever as to who Jesus is.

Because when we know who Jesus is, well then we can believe in him and we can follow him. And as Christians, we need to keep looking to him and we need to keep following him.

Peter later will urge believers to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And Paul encourages the Colossians saying, since then you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

Because the Christian life begins, continues, and ends with Christ. We never, ever, ever outgrow our need for him.

And so, our blueprint for strong foundations as we begin another new year is simple. Repentance and Jesus. We're really not reinventing the wheel here.

[23 : 25] Whether you've been a Christian for a long, long time or you've never been one, the essential foundations are the same and they don't change. We're sinners.

We're broken and we're lost. Because of that, we need to recognize our sin and repent of it. But repentance can't happen alone. Repentance works in conjunction with faith.

Believing in Jesus, the Son of God who came to bring sinners back to the Father and transform them. And so, this new year, it's well worth having some resolutions, a manifesto for where you hope to go.

But make sure the foundations are right. Real, tangible, fruit-bearing transformation comes through a foundation of repentance and faith in Jesus.

And from there, God is able to take us and to transform us, conforming us into the image of his Son. and in the power of the Spirit, who all believers are baptized with, we will not be a wasteland of the dead like the Pharisees and the Sadducees, but rather, we'll be like a vibrant and verdant forest full of rich fruits and green leaves and beautiful flowers.

[24 : 46] as Jesus said to his disciples, I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit.

Apart from me, you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers. Such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

And so, as we close, it should be our prayer and our expectation that this year, not only should we see growth in ourselves, the trees already here, as it were, but it should also be hoped and

expected that new branches and new trees are going to be added as we speak of Christ to others and invite people to know him and to know their need of him.

We should hope and pray that in Christ Church Glasgow, we see people young and old come to experience the gift of Jesus' baptism, baptism into his church in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

[26 : 13] Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain. Lord Jesus, build your house and grow your church to the praise of your glory. Amen.