



4: Prepare the Way (Matthew 3)

John the Baptist was a unique prophet of God, preparing people for the coming Messiah, but John's message to his ancient audience still needs to be heard & shared today.

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teachingnotes

John's Timeless Message

Matthew 3:1-3 (NIV)

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "**Repent**, for **the kingdom of heaven has come near.**" This is he 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.'" [Is 40:3]

John was the 2nd cousin of Jesus, born 6 months before Jesus, to Mary's cousin Elizabeth, whom Mary visited for 3 months John's birth (Lk 1:36, 39, 56-60). John was the son of Zechariah, a Levitical priest (Lk 1:5) who had been chosen by casting lots to burn incense in the temple of God in Jerusalem (Lk 1:8-9). As such, most would have expected John to follow in his father's footsteps and serve as a priest. But God had other plans for this young man - to **prepare the way for the Lord** (Lk 1:13-17).

❓ Can you imagine YOU being the forerunner, the herald announcing that the KING of kings is on His way?

John's Message: Repent because **the kingdom of heaven has come near.**

- **Repentance** is more than feeling sorry for getting caught, but a genuine desire to TURN from sin and RETURN to God's Presence.
- **The kingdom of heaven** is the same as *the kingdom of God*, with "heaven" substituting for the Hebrew "hashem" - the Name. To say that **the kingdom of heaven/God has come near** means that judgement is on the way, and people better get ready.

John the Baptist is the one that Isaiah wrote about 700 years before, Is 40:3 - who would **prepare the way of the LORD** (Hebrew - *YaHWeH*), that's God Himself!

JOHN WAS A STRANGE DUDE

Matthew 3:4 (NIV)

John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.

Rather than wear priestly clothes in a civilized city, John lived as a nomadic desert dweller, wearing strange clothes and eating strange things. **Camel's hair** could be woven into a thick, rough cloth that was essentially waterproof, while locusts and wild honey were staple foods for those living in the desert.¹ Yahweh allowed His people to eat locusts during their journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land 1500 years earlier (Lev 11:21-22).

John the Baptist had a ministry similar to the OT prophet, **Elijah** (Mt 11:14, 17:9-13). John's clothing was even reminiscent of Elijah, spoken of in 2 Kings 1.

2 Kings 1:8 (NIV) They replied, "He had a garment of hair and had a leather belt around his waist." The king said, "That was **Elijah** the Tishbite."

Before this moment, Jews referred this time as 400 years of silence since no legitimate prophet had arisen to speak for God for hundreds of years. But now, here he is - John the Baptist!

¹ Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2004), 133-134.

JOHN HAD A STRANGE PRACTICE

Matthew 3:5-6 (NIV)

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 Jordan River.

John had a strange practice - baptizing Jews. Jewish people would dunk *themselves* under water for ceremonial cleansing before entering the temple, but were never baptized by another person. Gentile **proselytes** who converted to Judaism were those who would be baptized by another person. (**Essenes**, the most strict sect of monastic Jews, *would* baptize one another twice a day out in the wilderness.)

John's 1-time baptism of Jewish people was super significant since most Jews thought they were in God's family simply because they were born into the Jewish family. But John's message is that every person must repent - turn from their sin and turn to God's grace. John is treating his fellow Jews like spiritual Gentiles who must convert to a new way of living - who must TURN FROM their sin and RETURN to God's grace.

REAL REPENTANCE vs LIP SERVICE or FAMILY DISCOUNT

Matthew 3:7-9 (NIV)

But when he saw many of the **Pharisees and Sadducees** coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: **"You brood of vipers!** Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? **Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.** And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.

The **Pharisees and Sadducees** - the religious leaders - didn't like John's message and they came to critique him. Here was John, the son of a priest who should be serving in sacred buildings dressed in priestly garments, who instead, is out in the rough wilderness wearing primitive clothing and baptizing other Jews,

- John calls them a **brood of vipers**: 1) poisonous snakes birthed from ancestors who were also poisonous snakes 2) a danger to people, injecting their venom and causing death. As snakes would **flee** from the fields being burnt off to prepare for planting, John warns these men about **the coming wrath**.
- John warns them against leaning on their Jewish heritage. Being in the family of father **Abraham** would not protect them from God's wrath.

God's wrath WAS coming...through the ONE who John was preparing people for. There was no hope for those who were **RAISED** as Jews. God's **PEACE** was only for those who would **produce fruit in keeping with repentance**.

John's message to his ancient audience still needs to be heard & shared today.

BIG TRUTH: Warn of God's Wrath & Offer God's Peace

JUDGEMENT or PEACE

Matthew 3:10-12 (NIV)

The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. "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**. 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**."

You don't have to be a Bible scholar or understand the farming references here to see that there are 2 outcomes awaiting the Jewish audience who are about to see the King of Creation step onto the stage.

GOOD TREE vs BAD TREE

- One tree produces good fruit - imagery for the person whose repentance is REAL.
- The other tree does not produce good fruit - and is **cut down and thrown into the fire**.

WHEAT vs CHAFF

- **His wheat is gathered into the barn** - symbolizing those who repent and belong to the One who is coming to divide His people from those who are not His people (read Mt 25).
- **The chaff**, separated from the wheat & no good to eat - would be **burned up with unquenchable fire**.

BAPTIZE with SPIRIT vs FIRE

- **He will baptize with the Holy Spirit** those who respond in repentance.
- **He will baptize with fire** those who refuse to respond in repentance - punished for their disobedience and treason before the King of Creation.

JESUS IS BAPTIZED

Matthew 3:13-15 (NIV)

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.

The One the Jewish people had longed to see, now 30 years old, makes the 60+ mile trip from Galilee to where John is baptizing. This event is so important that all 4 Gospels tell the story of Jesus' baptism (Mt 3:13-17; Mk 1:9-11; Lk 3:21,22; Jn 1:31-34). If John wasn't worthy to carry his sandals like a humble servant (Mt 3:11), then he certainly wasn't worthy to baptize Jesus. It's no wonder John says, "**I need to be baptized by you.**"

Why did Jesus need to be baptized?

1. **Jesus validates the ministry of John the Baptist.** John is a great prophet, whom God had sent to prepare the way of the Lord!
2. **Jesus was identifying with sinners.** Rather than standing far away from sinful people, the Savior was standing, walking, and living among those He came to save.
3. Jesus was about to begin the journey to the cross, **to fulfill all righteousness.** Baptism later became a picture and reminder of - Jesus DYING - being BURIED - and RISING from the dead! (Rm 6:3-4, Col 2:11-13, 1 Pet 3:18-22)

The Trinity of GOD

Matthew 3:16-17 (NIV)

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. 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."

- **Heaven opened** was biblical language referring to communication & interaction between God and His people (Is 64:1, Ezek 1:1, Jn 1:51, Acts 7:56).
- John saw **the Spirit of God** was **descending like a dove**, peaceful & gentle, and resting on Jesus. Just as kings were anointed with oil - a symbol of the presence of God's Spirit, it now becomes obvious to the Baptizer that **Jesus is the anointed, Spirit-led, Messiah-King** who John has come to announce.

My Son...with Him I am well pleased. This phrase tells us **the identity of Jesus** and **the mission of Jesus** as mentioned in 2 Old Testament messianic passages, Ps 2:7 and Is 42:1.

- Jesus is the **Son** of God - not the son of Joseph. "Son of God" doesn't mean God's kid. God didn't have a physical relationship with a human woman. Look how the term "**son**" is used in Ps 2.

Psalms 2:6-9 (NIV) "I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain." I will proclaim the Lord's decree: He said to me, "**You are my son**; today I have become your father. Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will break them with a rod of iron; you will dash them to pieces like pottery."

- Jesus is the **Spirit-filled Servant** in whom God is **well pleased**.

Isaiah 42:1 (NIV) Here is **my servant**, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; **I will put my Spirit on him**, and he will bring justice to the nations.

BIG TRUTH: Warn of God's Wrath & Offer God's Peace

1. **REPENT** - TURN from your sin and TURN to your Savior.
2. **TAKE** this same message to others.

heretoserveyou

Have questions and need some help? ...real soon...how about now? Please **call** or **text** us soon!

- * Contact **Jackie** (850-673-1582), **Christy** (850-673-9764), **Caleb** (864-315-8015), or another follower of Jesus soon!
- * Or call our **deacons & wives**: Alan & Christy Androski (850-464-1428), Steve & Debbie Bass (850-673-7952), Freddy & Joyce Howard (850-973-0047), Tim & Joni Hughey (850-464-1156), Mark & Dot Mancil (850-253-5405), Boss & Amelia Mulkey (850-464-6717), or Tom & Martha Waddail (850-973-0011).

discussionquestions

Take some time to discuss these questions with your family, friends, or group.

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1. What challenged or encouraged you most from today's teaching? (You might need to look back in your notes to help explain your answer.)
2. **Read Matthew 3:1-6.** What are signs of real repentance versus lip service? What does it mean to "produce fruit in keeping with repentance"? ([Mt 3:8](#))
3. **Read Matthew 3:7-9.** How might you point to John's baptism of Jewish people when you meet someone who thinks they are in right relationship with God because of their family's religious background or good works?
4. **Read Matthew 3:10-12.** Discuss the two outcomes of how people respond to Jesus.
5. **Read Matthew 3:13-17.** Why was Jesus baptized and how is the Trinity referred to in this passage?
6. **Today's BIG TRUTH** is based on John's message to warn of God's wrath & offer God's peace. Why is it important to share about BOTH - God's wrath & God's peace?
7. Share prayer needs and pray for one another.