

REPENT--PREPARING FOR THE KING

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By Pastor Stan
Matthew 3:1-12

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INTRO.

-- At the conclusion of the Passover Seder, the meal in which Jewish families retell the story of the deliverance from slavery in Egypt, a cup of wine is poured but no one drinks it. This cup of wine has a special title: the "Cup of Elijah." Part of the meaning in this ritual is that Elijah is commonly expected to be the one who will herald the arrival of the Messiah, and, as Rabbi Naftali Silberberg explains in his web site (Chabad.org):

[The Cup of Elijah] is an allusion to the future messianic redemption, which will be announced by Elijah. This is also why we do not drink, "enjoy," the fifth cup - as we have not yet experienced this redemption ... After commemorating the very first redemption of the Jewish people from Egypt we express our hope and firm belief in the coming of Moshiach, who will usher in the new and final redemption very very soon.

-- What Matthew is going to tell us in today's passage is that the Jews can go ahead and drink the wine in Elijah's Cup because Elijah has already made his herald. "Moshiach" has already come, and His redemption is no longer a future yearning but a present reality.

Cf., Matthew 3

-- Matthew 3 starts with the words "In those days," referring, as we are going to see, to the ministry of John the Baptist and the beginning of Jesus' ministry. What that tells us is that moving from the last verse of chapter 2 to the first verse of chapter 3 we jump ahead 30 years.

God has sent a herald to announce that the King has arrived and is about to inaugurate His Kingdom.

Read Matthew 3:1-12

I. The Man

A. His Description (vv. 1a, 4)

-- John sounds like the winner of a survivalist reality show. Most people wore robes made of wool or linen, but John wore a hairy camel's hair garment with a big leather belt. And he didn't preach in Jerusalem - he preached in the barren Judean Wilderness, a day's journey from Jerusalem.

B. His Connection to Elijah

-- Matthew's description of John is intended to make a connection between John and the OT prophet Elijah. Look at this description of Elijah in 2 Kings.

2 Kings 1:7-8 He [the king] said to them, "What kind of man was he who came to meet you and told you these things?" **⁸** They answered him, "He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist." And he said, "It is Elijah the Tishbite."

II. The Mission

-- This link to Elijah reveals the nature of John's mission.

A. The Prophecy

1. Malachi

-- Malachi, the last prophet and book in the OT, closes with this prophecy:

Malachi 4:5-6 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. **⁶** And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

-- These are the final words written by Israel's final prophet, and based on this passage the Jews expected the appearance of Elijah as the forerunner who would prepare for the coming of the Messiah.

2. Isaiah

-- Isaiah also prophesies the appearance of one who will prepare the way for the Messiah.

Isaiah 40:3 A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

-- This, of course, is the verse that Matthew quotes in today's passage.

Cf., v. 3

B. The Fulfillment

1. What Matthew tells us here is that John is the one who fulfills the prophecies about a forerunner who will prepare for the arrival of the Messiah. We see that also in Luke's Gospel. When the angel appeared to the elderly priest Zechariah to tell him that he and his wife Elizabeth were going to have a son.

Luke 1:13-17 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ... **16** And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, **17** and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

-- Notice that the angel says that John will fulfill the Elijah prophecy not by being a re incarnation of Elijah but by displaying the same kind of ministry and spiritual power as Elijah.

2. Later on in Matthew's Gospel Jesus will affirm that John had fulfilled the prophecy of Elijah.

Cf., Matthew 17:10-13

3. John himself made it clear that he was only a preparer - that he was getting people ready to accept the one who was coming after John.

Cf., 3:11-12

III. The Message

-- The primary way that John prepared people for Jesus was by preaching.

vv. 1-2

A. The Call to Repent

-- Matthew summarizes John's message in one concise sentence: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." John's preaching was first and foremost a call to "repent." The kind of repentance that John has in mind, biblical repentance, involves the entire person. Biblical repentance is a complete change - a change of the mind, a change of the emotions, and a change of the will.

1. A Change of the Mind

-- The Greek word for repent literally means to change one's mind. Repentance begins with a recognition of our sin, an acknowledgment of the ways that we are falling short of being and doing what God desires.

-- We find all three aspects of repentance in Psalm 51, the great Psalm in which David repents of his sin with Bathsheba. We see David's acknowledgement of his sin in verse 3.

Psalm 51:3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

2. A Change in the Emotions

-- Repentance also involves a change in our emotions. Repentance is not only a change in our way of thinking but also in our way of feeling. When we recognize that what we are doing is sin, then we start feeling guilt and regret about that sin. Again, in Psalm 51, David not only acknowledges his sin but also expresses sorrow over that sin.

Psalm 51:14 Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation

-- The sorrow of repentance is not a sorrow that we have got caught or that our sin has got us in trouble; rather, it's a sorrow that we have sinned against God. That's why David cries out as he does in Psalm 51:4.

Psalm 51:4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.

3. A Change in the Will

-- And true biblical repentance always involves a change in our will. Repentance involves a change in the direction and conduct of our lives. Instead of moving away from God we move towards Him. Instead of rising up in rebellion against His commands, we bow in submission to His will.

Psalm 51:10, 13 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. ... **13** Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

B. The People's Response (vv. 5-6)

-- We see the effectiveness of John's preparing for Jesus in how the people responded to John's ministry.

vv. 5-6

1. They "were going out to him." (v. 5)

-- Back in verse one Matthew told us that John did his preaching not in Jerusalem but in the Judean wilderness. That was about 15-20 miles from Jerusalem. It would have taken 6 hours or more to walk there from Jerusalem, and once you got there, there wasn't anything there. It's at the northern end of the Dead Sea, and it's bleak, barren desert. (It's where the Dead Sea scrolls were hidden - because the Essenes figured no one would ever find them there.)

-- People had to walk half a day to get to this place - just to hear a hermit preach. John didn't do any miracles - all he did was preach "Repent!" And yet people came. They came in large crowds. They came because the Holy Spirit was drawing them to hear the man that He had chosen to prepare for the Messiah.

2. They "were baptized by him."

-- But there's something even more remarkable than their going to hear John. What's really remarkable is that they were baptized by him!

-- In case you're wondering how they could be baptized in the Judean desert, that's not where John did his baptizing - he did that in the Jordan River which is only a few miles away.

-- So those who came to hear John responded by repenting and getting baptized as a sign that they were confessing their sinfulness. Now what's remarkable about this is that it was Jews who were getting baptized. The only time that baptism was practiced in Judaism was when Gentiles converted and became Jews. The Gentiles were baptized as a sign that they were becoming a part of God's people. Jews never got baptized because they were already God's people. But the Jews who got baptized by John did so as a sign that they recognized their sinfulness and that being Abraham's descendant wasn't sufficient to make them God's people and that keeping the Law of Moses wasn't able to put them right with God. Those whom John baptized were circumcised. They offered sacrifices at the Temple and sought to live by the Mosaic Law, but in getting baptized they were acknowledging that they were sinners (like the Gentiles) and that they needed a forgiveness that couldn't come through keeping the Law but could only come through God's mercy. Their baptism was a recognition that being a true Jew was not something outward but inward. Becoming a true child of God didn't happen by having a circumcised body but by having a circumcised heart - a heart that had been changed by the Spirit of God - a heart that desired to know and love God above everything else.

That's what prepared them to receive Jesus. And that's what we need as well.

CONCLUSION

This passage closes with John's powerful illustration about the coming Messiah.

v. 12

The harvester used the winnowing fork to toss the sheaves of wheat in the air separating the grain from the chaff. The harvester would then gather the wheat grain into the barn and burn the chaff. The wheat represents those who have repented of their sins and turned to believe and receive Jesus. The Lord Jesus is gathering the wheat to Himself, but the chaff faces the fire of His holy wrath.

John Bunyan was a great 17th century English preacher and author of Pilgrim's Progress. One day on the village green in Bedford, England, John was still in his sins, lifeless chaff facing the fire of God's judgment, when the Holy Spirit graciously spoke to him. Here's how Bunyan records what he heard the Spirit say to him:

"Wilt thou leave thy sins and go to heaven, or wilt thou have thy sins and go to hell?"

Repentance is leaving your sins and going to heaven, turning from your sins and turning to receive and follow Christ. That's what John Bunyan did that day. What will you do?