

Matthew 3:1-12 – “Preparing The Way”

Between chapter 2 and chapter 3 of Matthew’s Gospel there is an interval of around 28 years. We left Jesus in chapter 2 when he was about 2 years old, and we’ll see Him in chapter 3 as a 30 year old beginning His public ministry. There’s not a lot written in the gospels about Jesus’ early childhood or adolescent years. We don’t know what life was like for Him or what He did. Did He go through awkward pre-teen years? Did He have voice cracks? There are legends of Jesus performing miracles as a young child, but Biblically nothing is recorded about Him of this nature.

Now as we jump into this particular time in history, we’re introduced to John the Baptist, the one the Old Testament prophets predicted would arrive on the scene to announce the arrival of the Messiah. This is where we land here in Matthew 3.

3:1-2 - *"In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ² and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"*

Remember, John the Baptist is the cousin of Jesus. Elizabeth (Mary’s sister) bore him about 6 months before Jesus was born. These two may have grown up together, spent time wrestlin’ with each other in the Nazareth streets. But now John emerges in the wilderness of Judea. And he’s preaching a preparatory message for all Israel. This is a message for the people to turn their hearts to the Lord, because the One whom they’ve been waiting for is here. The ***kingdom of heaven is at hand.***

Now Matthew uses this term exclusively. It’s synonymous with the kingdom of God. But remember, Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience. They were so careful not to take the name of the Lord in vain that they wouldn’t even spell it out fully. So, because of their convictions and sensitivities, Matthew refers to it as the kingdom of heaven (though in a few incidences He used kingdom of God. Elsewhere in Scripture though it’s always referred to as the “kingdom of God”.

And this is speaking of the sphere of God’s rule and reign.

Now the reason so many people missed Jesus at His first coming was because they thought the Messiah would usher this kingdom in right away. The kingdom of God incited specific ideas in the mind of the Jew of the Messiah overthrowing present reigning powers and freeing Israel from the oppressive rule of Rome. They expected the Messiah to be a political leader.

- Expectations can sure lead us astray.
- It's like many of you when you were getting married. You had expectations. You men thought, *'Boy it's gonna be nice to have somebody take care of my laundry and cooking. I cannot wait to live in a clean house for a change.'* And you ladies were thinking, *'Wow it's going to be so exciting to have a man around the house to dote on me and bring me flowers, and sit down and have long meaningful conversations with.'*
- What you had been looking so forward to turned out to be a little bit off from your expectations. And those false expectations can lead to disappointment until you realize that true happiness and joy comes through living a yielded and sacrificial life to your spouse.

And that's what Jesus had for His people. He came to establish a different sort of kingdom at His first coming. He came to set up His rule and reign in the hearts of people who were willing to yield to Him and live a life of surrender to Him.

- Perhaps this is why Matthew more often uses **kingdom of heaven**. It was to show the people that this was going to be more of a spiritual nature to begin with.
- **Luke 17:20–21**, *"Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation;²¹ nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.""*
- And that's the reality for us today. We can experience this kingdom of God as we surrender the rule of our lives to Jesus Christ. Is He occupying the throne of your heart? Are you experiencing His peace and righteousness today? These are the marks of the kingdom.

And we know that this kingdom has a literal fulfillment as well and will be established physically on this earth when Jesus comes back again and occupies the Kingly throne in Jerusalem. This world will be redeemed and will be a period of peace, righteousness, and justice. It's what we can look forward to in a future day, but don't miss out on the blessings today with Jesus being King in your life and living a life surrendered to His rule and reign.

Now in order to experience these things, John comes saying, **Repent**. These are the first recorded words of Jesus in Mark's gospel:

- **Mark 1:15**, *"...The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."*

This word repent is an important word. It's the Greek word *Metanoeo* (met-an-oh-o) and it means to change one's mind, or to change one's way and direction. It's not just thinking differently about something, it's taking action and changing your course.

- This is a verb and it's in the active imperative. It's an ongoing active action we take, and it's not just a suggestion, it's a command. It's the only way to be saved. We are not just to feel bad about our sin, we're not just to admit we're sinners, we're to put our trust in Jesus as the only One who can forgive and remove our sin.
- This is the idea of repentance. When my wife first met me, she had a certain view of me; she thought a certain way about me. But then she repented! She began to have a more healthy mindset about me, but it also caused her to come my way. That's the idea of repentance.

The nation of Israel is very much in need of this. I think it's very fitting that John came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, because this is where Israel has been spiritually – out in the wilderness. It's been 400+ years since there's been a prophetic voice. Malachi was the last. And interestingly Malachi prophesied, **Malachi 4:5–6**, *"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. ⁶ And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse."*

- What's interesting is John the Baptist would be fulfilling this in part. Jesus would say in **Matthew 11:13–14**, *"For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. ¹⁴ And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come."*
- It's a very good possibility too that this will have a dual fulfillment in one of the two witnesses of Revelation 11. Many believe one of these will be Elijah.

Either way, the coming of John was prophesied by Isaiah some 700 years prior to John being born.

3:3 - *For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.'* "

Matthew quotes from Isaiah 40:3. This is what John was born to do. To prepare the way of the Lord.

- It was a common practice for roads to be smoothed, pot holes filled, and obstacles removed when a king would be planning a visit into a city.

Isaiah 40:3 had reference to the Jews returning from captivity to rebuild the temple. It would require them freeing themselves up from anything that would hinder or encumber their trip.

- This was the work John was setting out to do. He was preparing people to clear away anything that would hinder them from receiving Jesus.
- Are there things in your life that have been crooked and have impeded the work of the Lord?

Straighten out those paths, not out of religious requirement but because we want Jesus and nothing but Jesus!

John could have let this special mission go to his head. He could have had an entourage, flashy robes, some bling, but he comes humbly. He's not looking to make himself look good, he's come to exalt Jesus. He would say in **John 3:30**, *"He must increase, but I must decrease."*

3:4 - *Now John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.*

John came on the scene looking like the original hippie. This was a 'Jesus Revolution' of a different sort. He's not conducting meetings in fancy restaurants, he's in the wilderness snacking on locusts. He's even dressing a bit like Elijah (Elijah is described as, *"A hairy man wearing a leather belt around his waist."* **2 Kings 1:8**).

3:5-6 - *Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him ⁶ and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.*

Now this is where things get interesting. John drew a crowd! People started coming out to him from the surrounding regions and getting baptized. The crowds took his words to heart and began straightening out their crooked paths, ***confessing their sins*** and getting dipped in the Jordan as a symbolism of cleansing and new life.

Now baptism wasn't a new thing in this day. Jews would baptise Gentile converts to Judaism. But what was quite different was that John was baptising Jews! This was a big part of his ministry which is why he's known as John the Baptist.

- To be clear, John's baptism was not for salvation. It was rather a sign of a repentant heart. It was an outward demonstration of what was taking place inwardly.

- That is what baptism is for us today also. Being baptized doesn't save you. It is just that public, outward demonstration of what God has already done inwardly. It's showing we are laying down the old life; we've been washed clean through the grace of God and forgiveness provided through Jesus, and we've become a new creation in Christ.
- Our baptism actually differs from John's in that we are baptized *into* Christ.

Not only did he have large crowds walking in obedience to his call to repentance, but he drew some crowds of an interesting sect of people that we are introduced to here and will be no strangers to us in our study through Matthew.

3:7-8 - *But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance,*

The **Pharisees** were a strict group of religious Jews. Their whole thing was the interpreting of the law and traditions. And they were bent on seeing them carried out to the letter. They were an extremely self-righteous group. Their name means 'separated ones'. They were an influential group in the synagogue which truly separated themselves from anything they considered sinful. They gave Jesus the most opposition as they questioned His non observance of their oral laws and traditions.

The **Sadducees** were a wealthy, upper class, Jewish priestly party. They were more liberal and were in charge of the temple, its services, and concessions. They only held to the Pentateuch (the first 5 books of the bible) and were very materialistic. They did not believe in angels, spirits, or the resurrection of the dead.

The Pharisees and Sadducees were the two major parties of the Jewish council. They were often at odds with each other and fought one another for control of the nation. Pharisees were legalists, Sadducees were liberals. However, when it came to opposing Jesus, they were a united bunch.

John is well familiar with these guys as is evidenced by the way he greeted them: **Brood of vipers**... Harsh language it would seem, but John is wanting to be sure they are not just slithering their way in here for their customary rebuke.

They already felt they were alright based on their heritage. Many Jews felt that just being born into the family of Abraham was enough to garner salvation. A Jew couldn't go to hell.

There was no worry of wrath for these guys. So John sarcastically asks who warned them to flee? He knew they were there more to try and control the situation rather than submit to the work of God.

John is getting to the heart issue here. If they want to be truly right with God, ***bear fruits worthy of repentance***. Repentance is more than just some sorrow you express, or tears you shed. It is a lifestyle, or a life change. It will show itself through the fruits you bear. It's a life that has turned from willful sins and has put their faith in God and a desire to walk in obedience to Him. Jesus said in **Matthew 7:20**, "...by their fruits you will know them".

These brood of vipers weren't interested in a changed life, they were more about putting on a show and having their life appear as the model of righteousness. But it was all an act for the most part. Jesus Himself would call them hypocrites.

3:9 - *and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.*

Again, these religious leaders relied upon their human birth right. Since they were descendants of Abraham, they thought they had an automatic ticket to heaven. But the natural birth doesn't provide that, they need a spiritual birth. Just because you were a child of Abraham didn't make you a child of God.

- It's the same with us. You may have had the godliest grandparents or parents, but having a Christian heritage does not get you in. God has no grandkids. Every person needs to make a personal choice to receive Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.

3:10 - *And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

Many believed that the Messiah would come with judgment at His first coming. But not judgment towards them, just judgment towards their Roman oppressors. John however says, ***the ax is laid to root of the trees***. These religious leaders may have thought they had good roots, but if it's not producing fruit worthy of repentance and leading them to a right relationship with God, then watch out.

- This foreshadows what Jesus Himself would say in **John 15:5-6**, "*I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.*"

3:11 - *I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*

John knew that his baptism was just a preparatory one. It was to prepare people to receive Jesus.

He knew the prominence of Christ, and he also revealed the preeminence of Jesus' baptism. John realized that the baptism he was performing was inferior.

- John's baptism was one that demonstrated a change, but could never bring about that change.
- Jesus' baptism will be a baptism of the Holy Spirit. In other words, Jesus will give us the enabling power through the Holy Spirit to live changed lives.
- The work that Jesus will do will be a purifying work. Cleansing and purging us from the inside out. That's why His work is greater – it is more complete.

This work ultimately came on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. Think about the time Jesus spent with His disciples. They were struggling, making mistakes, messing up all throughout His ministry. I'm sure they were all thinking, *'Jesus if you leave us, we're going to fall apart. We're going to undue all the good things You've done!'*

But remember what Jesus said in **Acts 1:8**, *"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."*

And that's what happened in Acts 2 while they waited in the upper room.

- **Acts 2:3–4**, *"Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."*
- And the book of Acts is the report of all that was done through not only changed lives but empowered lives through the Holy Spirit. It's not so much the Acts of the Apostles, as it's the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

But according to verse 12, I believe the baptism of fire has it's more complete fulfillment not in Pentecost but in a future scenario. I believe it's a baptism not for the believer but for the unbeliever and it speaks of judgment.

3:12 - *His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.*

This was a method of separating the wheat kernels from the husks or chaff. The winnowing fan was like a pitchfork used to toss the stalks into the air. The wind would blow away the chaff and the straw, letting the heavier pure grain fall back to the ground on the threshing floor. All the wheat would be collected and the chaff would be burned. This all speaks of judgment.

- Jesus would refer to this in Matthew 25:31-46 – The sheep and the goats judgment at the end of the tribulation. This is where the repentant will be separated from the unrepentant. It will result in the preservation of the believing Israelites (and Gentiles) and the destruction of the unbelieving.

The kingdom of heaven is at hand. It can mean peace and blessing to those who will receive King Jesus. Or it will be accompanied with judgment and misery to those who oppose the Kingship of Jesus. Where do you stand today?

There is a story told of a pioneer family traveling across the western plains in a covered wagon. They watched in horror as a huge prairie fire rushed toward them driven by a strong wind. They were afraid they would be killed by the fire, but the Father acted quickly. He jumped down and quickly lit the dry prairie grass around their wagon. As the fire he set burned downwind, he then pulled his wagon onto the burned-out area and his family stood there as the fire came raging toward them. His daughter screamed out, *'Daddy we're going to get burned'*. But the Father replied, *'It's ok, the fire can't touch us where the fire has already burned.'* They found safety where the fire had already burned.

There is one place where the fire of God's judgment against sin has already fallen--at the cross of Jesus Christ. You can choose to wait and stand before God at the final, terrible judgment. Or you can choose to stand at the cross where God's wrath against sin has already burned. I don't know about you, but I'm standing at the cross of Jesus! I'm choosing to walk in repentance and receive the forgiveness and salvation freely given through receiving Jesus Christ.