

The Way Prepared
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Matthew 3:1-12

As we read this passage, use your “sanctified imagination” to see the author, Matthew writes like a television news reporter sharing this scene with us. *“Now let’s go LIVE to somewhere near the Jordan River where a great religious gathering has been taking place recently. Matthew is on the scene...Matthew, what’s the story?”*

Matthew 3:1–12 (ESV)

¹In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,

²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

³For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’ ”

⁴Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

⁵Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him,

⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

- Let’s unpack this news update from Matthew the reporter.
- Verses one and two are like headlines in a news story. Like any good journalist Matthew tells us: who, what, when, and where.
- Who: John the Baptist; when: “in those days”...at the end of 400 years of silence from God; where: the wilderness of Judea; what (was he preaching): “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”
- Verse three gives us context for this, Matthew says, *“It appears that John the Baptist is fulfilling a prophecy from the great Prophet Isaiah.”*
- **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)... refers to “highway construction workers” who were called on to clear the way in the desert for the return of the Lord as His

people, the exiles, returned to Judah from the Babylonian Captivity in 537 b.c. In similar fashion, John the Baptist was in the desert preparing the way for the Lord and His kingdom by calling on people to return to Him.¹

- John was the “head of construction” to pave the way for Jesus. We’re to be a part of that “construction crew” as we help people find Christ.
- Let’s get a picture of what was happening in that day: After Malachi’s prophecy, for 400 years there had been no prophets telling the people about God’s plan and how they should respond to it. We don’t know why God chose to be silent in this way, but He was.
- Instead of being alarmed that God was not speaking to them, the people grew more and more sinful. ²
- The appearance of John the Baptist not only fulfilled prophecy from Isaiah (quoted here) but also Malachi. Let’s take a quick look at this.

Malachi 3:1 (ESV)

¹“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.

- Verse four is a description of John’s unique wardrobe and diet. Why would that be of interest? Let’s imagine it in today’s terms: *“Folks, this preacher is covered in tattoos; looks like one of the Duck Dynasty guys; and is eating bugs and honey!”* **If we heard a description like that of a preacher today what would it tell us about him?**
- John was totally different than the “stereotypical” religious leaders of the day. Look at what Jesus said about John later:

Matthew 11:7–10 (ESV)

⁷As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?

⁸What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses.

⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

¹⁰This is he of whom it is written, “ ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’

- Beyond making a contrast with the religious leaders of that day, this description of John’s wardrobe has another significance.

In 2 Kings 1:8 (ESV) King Ahaziah’s messengers brought word from a prophet:

⁸They answered him, “He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist.” And he said, “It is Elijah the Tishbite.”

- Back to the prophet Malachi who had written:

Malachi 4:5–6 (ESV)

⁵“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.

⁶And 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.”

- The people had been expecting Elijah the prophet to come back. But this guy was named John the Baptist, not Elijah! He dresses like Elijah though. What does this mean?
- In Luke chapter one an angel comes to a priest named Zechariah to tell him that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a child...who would be named John...the Baptist. Here’s what the angel said about John:

Luke 1:17 (ESV)

¹⁷and 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.”

- Back to Matthew three, verse five. Matthew reports on the size of the crowds John was drawing: “all Judea and all the region about the Jordan.”
- In verse six we learn that the people were “confessing their sins” and being baptized in the water. Baptism wasn’t new to the Jewish people. They used it to bring non-Jewish people into their faith.

- THIS kind of Baptist WAS different. John wasn't saying baptism provided salvation! [Jewish historian] Josephus recognizes this (Ant. 18.5.2) when he writes that John taught that his followers "must not employ [baptism] to gain pardon for whatever sins they committed, but as a consecration of the body implying that the soul was already thoroughly cleansed."³
- Baptist is symbolic of the change that comes through repentance.
- When we get to verse seven, Matthew reports on a confrontation that took place with local religious leaders:

⁷But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

⁸Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

⁹And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.

¹⁰Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹"I baptize you with water for 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.

¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

- **Did the Pharisees and Sadducees (religious leaders of that day) come out to repent and be baptized? Why did they come?**
- John calls them a "brood of vipers." **What's a "brood?" What's a viper? What was he accusing them of being?**
- Look at John's sarcasm: "*Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*" In other words, "*You bunch of hypocrites! Did you come to be baptized?*"
Verse nine: Why did John accuse them of saying, "We have Abraham as our father?" How could that apply to "religious" people today?
- Let's get down to how all this applies to US this week.

- Back to verse two. John's message was "repent" for "the kingdom of Heaven is at hand."
- **What did the Jewish leaders of that day tell people to do in order to be a part of the kingdom of Heaven? What did John tell them to do?**
- After centuries of the Jewish people struggling to be GOOD ENOUGH by keeping rules and regulations, John the Baptist brings a message of HOPE. And the way to access that hope was to REPENT.
- **What does it mean to REPENT?**
- The tough message John had for the greedy, power-hungry, religious leaders is really the message for people today.
- Verse eight: "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance." If you have a relationship with God there will be evidence...fruit! A real fruit tree that is healthy can't help but produce fruit.
- Verse nine: Family religious background won't get you into Heaven. Getting into heaven comes from a personal repentance. Being sorry for my sin and turning from my sin to God.
- What happens if I don't repent? Verse ten: The same thing that happens to a fruit tree that doesn't produce fruit...cut down and destroyed.
- In verse eleven John says the one who will come and provide this hope of Heaven is not John himself, but the Messiah they've expected...the Christ.
- John baptized with water as a symbol. The coming Messiah would baptize with the "Holy Spirit and fire." The choice of accepting or rejecting Jesus is the choice between those two. The Holy Spirit to live inside us and help us to live as Christ wants us to live. Or the fire of judgment for those who reject Him. That's the choice and REPENTANCE is the transaction.

So, What's the Takeaway?

- In political circles today there's a term: "RINOs." Republicans in name only. John was warning against being a "CINO." Christian in name only.
- The religious leaders of that day claimed to be servants of God. John called them a "brood of vipers"...children of Satan. They were CINOs.

- John warns us not to count on the fact that we live in a Christian country or come from a Christian family, or are members of a Christian church.
- The only way to truly be a child of God is to REPENT. To TURN from sin.
- The only way a sinful human CAN repent is through faith in Christ.
- Repentance will lead to behavior that is evidence...fruit...of righteousness.
- Do you and I naturally show evidence of a relationship with Christ?
- Does my conduct match my label, or am I a Christian in name only?
- What if I know beyond the shadow of a doubt I'm saved. How does this lesson apply to me?
- Christians are to be part of the "highway construction crew" making the way level for people to join us in the family of God.

The Life Application Study Bible comments:

"People who do not know Jesus need to be prepared to meet him. We can prepare them by explaining their need for forgiveness, demonstrating Christ's teachings by our conduct, and telling them how Christ can give their lives meaning. We can 'make straight paths for him' by correcting misconceptions that might be hindering people from approaching Christ. Someone you know may be open to a relationship with Christ. What can you do to prepare the way for this person?"⁴

- So, this week, put on your camel hair coat; your leather belt; and pack your locust and honey lunch! We've got some road building to do to smooth the way for others to come to Christ!

¹ Barbieri, L. A., Jr. (1985). Matthew. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 24). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

² Explore the Bible – Leader's Guide P.14

³ The New American Commentary Volume 22 - Matthew by Craig L. Blomberg

⁴ Life Application Study Bible P. 1645