

Preparing (Matthew 3:1-12)
The King Has Come (Colin Hughes)
Sunday Evening 25 January 2009

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

1 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea 2 and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." 3 This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

"A voice of one calling in the desert,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.' "

4 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. 5 People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. 6 Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

7 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? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 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. 10 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.

11 "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 12 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."

Matthew 3:1-12

He was born into an ordinary Jewish family. He had no wealth and no formal training. He rejected following in his father's tradition as a priest. And he spent his whole life living in the desert, wearing camel's hair for clothing, and eating insects and honey for food. Yet Jesus said of him, "I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist."

In Luke 1:13-17 we read that before John was born an angel of the Lord appeared to his father, Zechariah, and declared, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John." Now this news almost defied belief. For we are told in verse 7 that Zechariah and his wife were both very old and they were unable to have children because Elizabeth was barren. The angel continued, "He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord." There it is again, "He will be great in the sight of the Lord." Then the angel instructed Zechariah, "He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

We are beginning to grasp what a special child John was to be. The angel said that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. When Mary found that she was to bear a son, she visited her relative, Elizabeth - for Jesus and John were related - and in Luke 1:41 we are told that when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, John leaped in her womb, filling Elizabeth with the Holy Spirit. Even before John was born he was spiritually aware of the Lord's presence in the womb of his mother, Mary. But ultimately, John the Baptist, or the Baptiser as he is sometimes called, would be charged with task of preparing God's people for the coming King.

Around four-hundred years had elapsed since God last spoke through any prophet, and it is called the Silent Years or the Intertestamental Period. The very last words spoken by God to His people through the prophet Malachi were, "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse." (Malachi 4:5-6)

The angel of the Lord spoke almost identical words to Zechariah and by doing so he had declared that his son would be the fulfilment of this prophecy; the silence was about to be broken and God would speak again through his prophet, John the Baptist. But was John really Elijah?

In John 1:19-21, written by the Apostle not the Baptist, we read that John the Baptist was questioned by the priests as to his identity. John said, "I am not the Christ." So they asked him if he was Elijah. He said that he was not. And when asked if he was the Prophet, he answered, no.

However, in Matthew 17:10-13, we hear Jesus making an apparently contradictory statement:

10 The disciples asked him, "Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?"

11 Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. 12 But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. (Of course, Jesus was referring to John's beheading.) In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." 13 Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.

Matthew 17:10-13

So how do we reconcile this? Did John the Baptist lie, did he not realise who he was, or was Jesus mistaken? Of course, none of those are true. The answer is given in Matthew 11:7-14. Whilst John was still in prison awaiting his fate, Jesus spoke to the crowd about John.

7 "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? 8 If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. 9 Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' 11 I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. 12 From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. 13 For all the Prophets

and the Law prophesied until John. 14 And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.

Matthew 11:7-14

The final verse is the key: "If you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come." That is, for those that God has given the faith to see, John the Baptist is the Elijah promised through the prophets, and Jesus is the promised King. John knew that those who were asking him about his identity still remained in darkness. So they would reject him and to them neither he nor Jesus would be the fulfilment of the promise.

Recall the final verses of the Old Testament we read earlier from Malachi. The Jews were promised that Elijah would herald the great and dreadful day of the Lord's coming. They understood this to mean that the arrival of the King would signal the end of their oppression. God would finally judge the nations and the Jews would rule the earth. But Malachi finished with this harrowing warning, "Or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."

And tragically for the Jews the New Testament tells us that they did reject the forerunner, John the Baptist, and beheaded him. In the same way they rejected the King of Kings, Jesus, and crucified Him. Consequently they would be struck down and cursed by God. And so it was that the nation of Israel's special relationship with God ended and God offered His salvation to all the nations.

Now let us return to the beginning of Matthew chapter 3. In the previous chapter Jesus was still an infant. Other than one reference in Luke's gospel to Jesus going to the temple when he was twelve years of age we have no other information about the younger years of Jesus. The story picks up around thirty years later when we read in the first verse of chapter 3 that John came preaching. It is interesting to note that the combination of Greek words which Matthew uses here for "came preaching" are not the common words used respectively for "came" and "preaching". Instead he chose a combination that signifies the arrival of a special person who heralds a divine truth. This is a deliberate intention of Matthew, as the purpose of his whole gospel is to present Jesus as King.

In Biblical times a herald was always sent ahead of a king who travelled to another city or land. He would fulfil two roles. Firstly he would travel ahead to announce the imminent arrival of the king to the people. Secondly he would be responsible for preparing the roads, ensuring that the journey would be easy. But unlike a herald of an earthly king, John the Baptist is heralding the arrival the King of Kings. And instead of preparing a dirt road he was preparing the hearts of the people so that the King may enter.

However, the Jews were expecting the coming Elijah to announce that the end of their suffering was imminent and the coming King would lead them to victory over the nations. John's message was quite different to anything they were expecting. After four-hundred years of silence a voice cried out in the desert and his message was, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

You would imagine that no one would be interested in such a message and they would ignore him as just another crazy hermit. However, we read in verses 5 and 6 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 Jordan River."

Not only were people pouring out to see him, but when they heard his message they responded by confessing their sins and being baptised.

Jews understood the need to confess their sins, but this was normally done on a sin-by-sin basis; some Jews would undertake ceremonial hand washing whenever they sinned, and this could be done many times in a single day depending how often you sinned. However, John was calling for something quite different: he was calling for a once-for-all repentance.

Now we need to understand something here. If a gentile converted to Judaism it was necessary for them to undertake a ceremonial washing. And yet here we have John asking the same thing of the Jews. Clearly this message would have been deeply offensive to the teachers of the Law because he was saying that they, the chosen people of God, needed to turn to God!

Sure enough it wasn't long before, in verse 7, we read that many Pharisees and Sadducees came to see him. To see both the Pharisees and Sadducees together is quite remarkable because they hated each other. Yet they came united to see John. In fact, the only other time we know that they united in this way was when they conspired together to have Jesus crucified.

It might help to understand the differences between these two groups.

The Pharisees conformed to every aspect of the Law, but they also added tradition to the mix, which meant they had rules and customs for just about every circumstance in life. They believed in the resurrection and so they believed that every good thing they did now would add to their future reward. They could not stand being in the presence of sinners and would never be found in the company of tax collectors or prostitutes. They simply neglected their God given responsibility of ministering to those very people who needed to hear God's message most of all. Jesus had no time for the Pharisees and condemned them for focussing on the external whilst their hearts were filled with sin.

The Sadducees, on the other hand, did not believe in the resurrection; they lived for the now. They rejected the traditions of the Pharisees and believed that their guidance came only from the first five books of the Bible. Incidentally, the chief priests and the Sadducees we read about in the Bible are one and the same. They were in charge of the temple and they existed to profit by whatever means, collaborating with whichever political group that held power. If a Jew undertook a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and wished to make a sacrifice, then it was necessary to exchange their money into "temple currency", and the animal to be sacrificed had to be purchased from within the temple. The Sadducees arranged for highly inflated exchange rates and then they charged equally extortionate amounts for the animals that were to be sacrificed. All the time they became richer and richer. This was why, when Jesus visited the temple, he became angry and drove out the money changers. It also explains why the Sadducees, who had a profitable operation up and running, were keen to have Jesus executed.

We recall that John spent his whole life living a life of extreme denial in the desert. In doing so he had not allowed his mind to become infected by the twisted teaching of the religious leaders of his day, and he had learned to live a life without any dependence on comforts. So, like Jesus, John had such clarity of mind that he saw the Pharisees and Sadducees for the fakes they were. We read in verse 7, "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?"

Being likened to a snake would be a terrible insult, but especially a viper. Vipers are small brown snakes that live in the desert. Unlike many other snakes that only attack when threatened, vipers are aggressive killers. They lie still on the desert floor and because of their colouring they resemble sticks, being almost invisible. Yet if anything approaches they strike out without warning and sink their venomous fangs into the unsuspecting victim. However, John went one step further by likening them to children of a viper. To appreciate the depth of this insult we need to understand that newborn vipers chew their way out of the womb, killing the mother in the process. He was accusing them of being cunning, deadly snakes, but more significantly he was suggesting that everything they did had contributed to the corruption, and ultimately, the destruction of their mother, the church, which had served to nurture them and the people of Israel.

Whenever a desert fire struck, the dry almost lifeless grasses would burn rapidly like a wave of flames sweeping through the desert. The vipers would often be found at the head of this fire slithering frantically to escape the flames. In the same way, John says to them, "Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" Then in verse 8 he then goes on to say, "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."

True repentance is more than saying you're sorry. It is more than feeling guilty just because you've been caught out and are embarrassed of the consequences. True repentance is about turning your life around and walking away from your sinful ways, even those secret sins which have not been exposed. More importantly it is recognising that we sin against God and God alone. Such is the effect of true repentance - as it can only be achieved by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in our lives - is that your life begins to bear fruit. It is impossible to have truly repented and not to bear fruit. This is why John could so confidently accuse the Pharisees and Sadducees of being a "brood of vipers". They professed one thing with their lips, but showed no evidence of true repentance in their lives.

He went on to say, in verse 9, "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." John was warning them that their ethnic roots would be no substitute for true repentance. And by saying that God could raise children for Abraham out of these stones he was referring to the gentiles. In Matthew 8 we read about a Roman Centurion showing an incredible act of humility in requesting Jesus might heal his servant. Jesus says to those following Him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matthew 8:10-12)

In line with this warning that Jesus gave, John went on to say, "The axe 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." We note that this is not a threat, but he says the axe is already at the root. In other words, God has judged the nation of Israel unworthy to be sole heirs. His reference to the axe at the root of the tree should have sent shivers down the spines of teachers of the Law, as the prophet Ezekiel had already written, "Which of the trees of Eden can be compared with you in splendour and majesty? Yet you, too, will be brought down with the trees of Eden to the earth below; you will lie among the uncircumcised, with those killed by the sword." (Ezekiel 31:18a)

And as experts of the Scriptures the teachers of the Law should have immediately thought of the words of the prophet Jeremiah.

9 Then the LORD said to me, "There is a conspiracy among the people of Judah and those who live in Jerusalem. 10 They have returned to the sins of their forefathers, who refused to listen to my words. They have followed other gods to serve them. Both the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken the covenant I made with their forefathers. 11 Therefore this is what the LORD says: 'I will bring on them a disaster they cannot escape. Although they cry out to me, I will not listen to them. 12 The towns of Judah and the people of Jerusalem will go and cry out to the gods to whom they burn incense, but they will not help them at all when disaster strikes. 13 You have as many gods as you have towns, O Judah; and the altars you have set up to burn incense to that shameful god Baal are as many as the streets of Jerusalem.'

14 "Do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them, because I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their distress.

15 "What is my beloved doing in my temple as she works out her evil schemes with many? Can consecrated meat avert your punishment? When you engage in your wickedness, then you rejoice."

16 The LORD called you a thriving olive tree with fruit beautiful in form. But with the roar of a mighty storm he will set it on fire, and its branches will be broken. 17 The LORD Almighty, who planted you, has decreed disaster for you, because the house of Israel and the house of Judah have done evil and provoked me to anger by burning incense to Baal.

Jeremiah 11:9-17

And in addition to taking away Israel's unique privilege of being the chosen people of God, further judgement was to befall them: forty years later history teaches us that Jerusalem was destroyed and the temple was removed without a trace.

John's message about judgement could not have been any clearer. In verse 10 he was repeating the warnings given by the prophets that trees not bearing good fruit would be cut down and thrown into the fire.

In verse 11 he explains that he baptises with water, but one more powerful will come and baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire. Make no mistake that the baptism referred to here is the fire of judgement. In other words, it can be seen that in verse 10, verse 11, and as we shall hear in a moment, verse 12, he consistently uses the image of fire to represent God's judgement. This is why the prophet Malachi said it would be a "great and dreadful day of the LORD" (Malachi 4:5). It would be ironic if it were not so sad that this judgement the nation of Israel longed for was ultimately against them. This is why the prophet Amos had said, "Woe to you who long for the day of the LORD! Why do you long for the day of the LORD? That day will be darkness, not light." (Amos 5:18)

So John finishes his message, in verse 12, by saying, "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." This is a truly terrifying warning. Jesus who is Saviour is also Judge, and one day Jesus will oversee the separation of the children of God from the children of the devil. Those who are sons of God will receive the reward of eternal life, but the rest will be thrown into an unquenchable fire. Of the one-hundred and sixty two references to hell that are found in the New Testament it is our Lord who makes seventy of them. Hell is a frightening reality. Consequently it should be a significant driving force in our urgency to preach the message of repentance to the lost.

In the same way that Jesus would teach, John taught people to repent, because, "the kingdom of heaven is near." For once Jesus began His preaching ministry we read in Matthew 4:7, "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'" In fact, it was to become the model for our preaching and evangelism. In Matthew 10:7, "Jesus taught his disciples, saying, "As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.'" In other words, we are not to look the other way, but teach people that judgement is near and they must get their lives in order. I would like to finish with one other observation. In Matthew 11 we read, "When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?' Jesus replied, 'Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.'" (Matthew 11:2-4)

John knew his life was soon to end and perhaps he hoped that if Jesus was the one for whom he had prepared the way then he would rescue him. In hearing Jesus' reply, John would have realised immediately that Jesus was effectively quoting from Isaiah. However, knowing the Scriptures he would have also realised that Jesus stopped short. For it says, "to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners." (Isaiah 61:1b) In other words, Jesus was saying to John, "Yes, I am the Messiah for whom you have prepared the way, but your work here on earth is done." Jesus deliberately omitted the reference to releasing prisoners and this would not have gone unnoticed by John.

We might be saddened by this, thinking that after everything John had done he deserved better. But let us not forget what John's whole life was about. His calling was to prepare the way for the Lord. Just like Simeon who was an old man in the temple when the baby Jesus was presented for circumcision, John's heart would also have rejoiced with words like those of Simeon, who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, recognised the Christ child, took him in his arms, and praised God saying, "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." (Luke 2 29:32)

John the Baptist was obedient to his calling and as a result he is recorded in history as the final prophet in a long line of others who faithfully revealed God's plan of salvation. John not only prepared the way for "one who is more powerful than I, sandals I am not fit to carry," but he had the special privilege of seeing Him with his own eyes.

Although so much will never be demanded of us, God has chosen to use us in our weaknesses so that, to quote Paul from his first letter to the Church in Corinth: "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power." (1 Corinthians 2:4-5) So let us boldly declare that "the kingdom of heaven is near", calling for true repentance, and not deviating in any way from preaching the cross of Christ: His death and resurrection. By doing this we serve faithfully to prepare the way of the lost so that as God transforms their hearts and minds they will be ready to receive Christ the King. What an honour and a privilege! May we thank God and commit ourselves on a daily basis to this blessed service. Amen.