

Are you ready to meet the King?

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[0 : 00] Hi everyone, I'm Amy and I'll be doing the Bible reading for today. The reading is from the book of Matthew, chapter 3, verses 1 to 12.

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the desert of Judea, and saying, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. 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. 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. 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. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptized, 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 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. 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.

[1 : 33] He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with 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. Father, I pray simply that you would open our eyes to see Jesus, for each one of us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Amen. Well, tomorrow has been called Freedom Day. It's Freedom Day tomorrow, according to an ABC News article. Freedom from the captivity of the COVID restrictions. More people can gather together, we can sing at Christmas, a handful of people can dance again. I'll happily step aside and let you dance if you want to. And this will mean that there's more jobs again. That's probably, the best news, isn't it? The first line of the article says that pubs, theatres and places of worship all agree next week's Freedom Day in New South Wales will be the best Christmas present they could wish for. It's good news, isn't it? We're all looking forward to it. We should be thankful and not take it for granted. Now, I'm sure many people had it worse than me in Australia, but calling it Freedom Day just feels to me a bit over the top. It made me wonder, will lifting the restrictions make my life better? I think that really depends on how you measure a good life.

So for instance, during the COVID restrictions this year, I think I was actually shown that there's a much greater captivity that I need freedom from than just the restrictions. Let me show you what I mean.

Now, this probably depends on your personality, but a week into the lockdown back in April, with all these life commitments suddenly cancelled, as an introvert, I loved the extra time that I could just use for however I wanted to spend it. I don't know if you found that. It probably depends on personality. Or when the madness erupted with the panic buying. Even though I resolved to only buy what I needed for that week, like usual, I remember standing in the aisle of Coles holding a bag of rice that I didn't need and having this battle inside me, will it be here next week? And I took it for myself.

When the lockdown lifted and these commitments started up again, it was difficult to leave the house, did you find? Like to set the alarm earlier, to actually drive to places, oh, what a burden.

[4 : 42] It gets in the way of your agenda again. Now, you might be thinking these are very minor things, but I believe they're examples of my heart being captive, that I'm devoted to a life living for myself.

The outward situations change, but the problem inside my heart remains the same. The heart devoted to self can sometimes have very little impact on others, like you wouldn't even notice it.

But other times, I think you would agree with me, a life devoted to self can really harm and let others down. I wonder, will we use our renewed freedoms tomorrow for ourselves?

Or are we excited because we have more opportunities to serve others? Is your heart devoted to living for yourself?

God's word to us today in Matthew is going to tell us about the greatest freedom day. The day when God came to set us free on the inside. So let's listen to what God says to us today.

[6 : 08] After Matthew has spent two chapters looking at the birth of Jesus and how he clearly meets the criteria for God's promised king, he skips over 25 years or so of Jesus' life.

He's not a very good biographer, if that's what he's trying to do. Which it's not, he's got a point to make. Our attention is then drawn in chapter 3 to this camel hair wearing, locust eating, probably smelly man, living outside civilisation in the wilderness, a preacher who announces this day of freedom.

What a weird thing to draw our attention to. The Bible rarely tells us what someone looks like. So it's interesting that we're told in 2 Kings 1.8 that Elijah the prophet, who lived a further 850 years before John, he wore a garment of hair with a leather belt around his waist.

Now why is this significant? It's significant because God's final promise in the Old Testament, before Jesus turns up, is Malachi 4.5. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.

As far as we know, there's absolutely nothing attractive about John that people back then or us today would be attracted to him, to come to him. We're told in verse 5 that many people did.

[7 : 41] Like a lot of people confused him for the king himself. That's how popular he was. Many people came and listened. Now why is he worth listening to?

He's worth listening to because he is the last prophet to come before the great and awesome day, the day called the Day of the Lord, the day when God himself walks in the door, when he turns up.

Isaiah the prophet said the same thing and Matthew quotes it. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. Make his path straight. The Lord is coming.

Now the original context of this quote in Isaiah is about God's people being set free from captivity, a new exodus, a new freedom.

If John is this second Elijah preparing the way, then the Day of the Lord is here. It's arrived. It's happened. And the prophets were clear that the Day of the Lord was a day of salvation, bringing everlasting freedom for those who want God to be in control.

[9 : 02] But it's also the Day of God's anger for anyone who doesn't want God to be God. God is showing up. It's either going to be freedom or anger.

Depending on whether we want God to be God. Another clue that Matthew gives us that this new day has arrived is the setting. It's in the wilderness.

Now, the wilderness is where God loves to bring about new beginnings. So we see it when the Israelites come out of Egypt.

After leaving captivity in Egypt, they're taken into the wilderness and it's in the wilderness that God comes to them at Mount Sinai and enters into a covenant relationship with them.

It's in the wilderness. There's nothing there. That's where God meets people and starts the new covenant relationship. But for Israel back then, that freedom to live with God, that freedom to live for God, it was short-lived.

[10 : 07] It didn't last. Because the problem in their hearts, they just stuffed it up again and again and again. So God promised through the prophets a new day of freedom.

A new exodus from captivity in the wilderness. I love the pictures in the next chapter of Isaiah, chapter 41. chapter 41.

When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I, the Lord, will answer them.

I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them. I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, the olive, that they may see and know, may consider and understand together that the hand of the Lord has done this.

The Holy One of Israel has created it. Now what's the point of that? The crowds who first heard John, they had to leave Jerusalem.

[11 : 20] They had to leave the city and go into the wilderness for this new beginning. They had to leave behind their status as Jews, as members of the people of God.

They had to leave that behind, not trust in it. They had to leave behind the religious establishment that said, this is how you approach God. They had to leave that behind and go to the wilderness.

So too, I think we need to leave behind whatever we look to in life. As the source of our confidence before God, we've got to leave that behind and come to God with nothing and let him create a garden in our hearts.

We've got to come to him with nothing in the wilderness and he creates something new. So John's message in verse 2 is really brief, but it's life-changing.

It's history-changing. Here's his message. Here's what's going to bring about the change. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

[12 : 32] That's it. The kingdom of heaven isn't about a place. The kingdom of heaven is not the church, the institution.

It is really about God's kingship, his sovereignty. I like how a guy named R.T. France puts John's message. He says it like this.

God is now taking control. He's come. God is now taking control. The kingdom of heaven is the rule of God.

Now, we might assume that the rule of God is kind of like the COVID restrictions. It's a damper. It's restraining life. But that's not true. God's good rule is like water pouring in the wilderness that causes thriving.

It sets us free. Of course, in one sense, ever since God created the world, he's always been ruling.

[13 : 41] He's God. He's still ruling. But in another sense, people don't recognize his rule. People don't like his rule. People fight against him being God of their lives.

And so there's this tension. John's message is, the kingdom of heaven is now. It starts in our hearts.

It's when people acknowledge that God alone is God and want to live in his good ways. It's when people love God and worship him alone.

People all over the world. That's the changes in here. The kingdom of heaven is arriving in people's hearts. That time has begun.

It's arrived. It's not future. It's arrived. It's not future. Which is why it is time for every person to repent.

[14 : 41] Now, repentance isn't just feeling sorry for what you've done, although you've got to start there. Repentance is to abandon living for yourself and turn back to God.

It's to give your entire allegiance to him, not to self. And John gives us two pictures of how urgent our situation is.

He says in verse 10, even now the axe is laid at the root of the trees. Every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

There are serious consequences to trying to dethrone God in our lives. That is a serious thing to try and do. The axe is placed at the root of the tree.

It is ready to swing. Every tree, the whole tree, it's at the root. The whole tree will come down. There's no time to waste. The gardener wants to find good fruit.

[15 : 48] That's what a fruit tree is for. Otherwise, it's worthless, only good for burning. God is looking for the fruit of a life lived in love of God which overflows in the love of others.

But notice that as every tree, the judgment is selective. God isn't just swinging wildly. He's careful. It's selective. Each person is judged according to their own fruit or lack thereof.

So the question for us is will he find fruit on your tree? The other picture is a farming one in verse 12.

After harvesting the wheat, there's a pile of wheat mixed up with all the other bits that got caught up in the threshing. Now the farmer uses a shovel, a winnowing fork, it's called here, to throw it up in the air and the light bit, the useless bits are lighter and the wind blows it away and the wheat falls back down.

The wheat is bundled up and safely brought into the barn. The chaff, the useless bits, is bundled up and put into the fire. Notice again the judgment is selective.

[17 : 14] The wheat isn't burned with the chaff nor is the chaff accidentally bundled up with the wheat. John says the situation is urgent. The winnowing fork is in his hand.

He's ready to separate. Bringing his people into his barn safely and the rest burnt with unquenchable fire.

Fire that can't be extinguished. Now to be honest with you, I had to spend a lot of time this week just researching this word unquenchable and things like every fiver of my being wants this not to mean what it means.

Maybe I'm okay in the extreme cases like Hitler and the like of them having eternal unquenchable fire. Maybe I'm okay with that but for ordinary people this idea is just terrifying.

Many Christians try and downplay what the Bible says, what Jesus himself says later on. So one idea that people have come up with is purgatory where people just pay for their sins and then they go to heaven.

- [18 : 33] Another idea is that only Christians have eternal life. Everyone else just ceases to exist. Unfortunately this picture here of a fire that can't be extinguished is a picture of eternal conscious experience and Jesus talks about this later.

It's a terrifying thought. But even if we struggle with I think we should all struggle with this idea. I think anyone should be rejoicing about this concept.

But we've got a choice. We can sit as judge over what God says in the Bible and decide it's too harsh or we can listen to what the righteous judge says.

While we do, we need to always remember what God says in Ezekiel 33 11. Please hear this clearly. as I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked.

I have no pleasure. But that the wicked would turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways.

- [19 : 57] For why will you die? That is the heart of God. He takes no pleasure in the death of anyone. God's just judgment, the words of Malachi say it best.

Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? Is there any good tree?

Is there any good wheat? Well, before you despair, before we despair, you need to see the surprising answer to who the king counts as good and whom he will cut down.

We see two groups of people coming out to John and they represent the two responses we can have to King Jesus. people. If you were to ask a Jewish person living in Jerusalem at the time, show me what a godly person looks like, they would take you to one of two groups of people.

The Sadducees or the Pharisees. They're the religious elite. They're at the top. The Sadducees were politically in charge. They were the priests in the temple.

- [21 : 14] And the Sadducees, they were just so careful to keep God's rules that they added rules just to be even more careful. Everyone thought these guys were close to God.

They're at the top. If anyone's getting in, they're getting in. But verse 7, when these religious elites come out to see why all the crowds are coming to John, he does not welcome them.

You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come. Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

They too needed to turn their hearts back to God, but they thought they were already pretty good by their own efforts. They were Abraham's descendants.

They thought they were already members of God's people. They were confident they were already good at running their own life. Yet from God's perspective, where their confidence in themselves, their lack of awareness of their sin, they're in danger of hell.

- [22 : 22] It was the religious elite who were most in danger. And then surprisingly, again, it's the ordinary people, the people you could look at and they obviously haven't lived for God.

God. It's those people who came out to John who admitted that they need forgiveness. They admitted that they need freedom from their sin, that they need a new beginning.

It isn't the self-confident person that the king welcomes, it's the person who confesses their need for the king to forgive them and change them. We see in verse 6, to symbolise their turning back to God, they're baptised by John, confessing their sins.

So baptism, it was common back then for converts to Judaism to immerse themselves in water to show a change in their life, to stop worshipping other gods and to worship the God of the Jews.

Or it was common for Jews on their way to the temple to wash themselves. What's different about John's baptism was to accept his message that the new day of God's rule under God's appointed king has begun because the king has shown up.

[23 : 46] It was to believe his message. It was to accept freedom on God's terms. Even the act of having John immerse them, so they didn't immerse themselves, the act of John baptizing.

Even that symbolizes that you don't change yourself. You must receive it. It must be done for you. But John is really clear.

His water baptism was just to prepare people for the real inside change that only the king can give you. John can't give it. I can't give it to you. You must go to the king himself to get that internal cleansing.

A radical change has to happen, like turning stones into children. Only God can do that.

With enough willpower and motivations, I can modify some of my behaviors. Like, I've cut down from three coffees to two each day. That's a big win for me.

[24 : 58] But how will my heart, that is so devoted to a life living for myself, be set free to love God and others? How will that happen?

The prophet Ezekiel in chapter 36 said that God will one day bring about this radical change. Let me read his words. God said, I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you, and I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh, and I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules, and you shall be my people and I will be your God.

John says the day of inner renewal has arrived with King Jesus. verse 11, he points forward to this baptism inside.

He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I'm not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

And then Jesus walks onto the scene, the next verse, and he's baptized by John. That's a bit surprising and we're going to look at that next week.

[26 : 46] Why does he choose to be baptized? The mighty one has arrived. The day of the Lord is here.

The King has come. God is now taking control. How does he take control of our hearts?

It's not by force. God is going to do it. I like the quote by Augustine which captures the lengths Jesus has gone to, not to condemn us, which he has every right to do, but to set us free.

So it's in the bulletin, but let me read it. Talking about Jesus, he lies in a manger, but he holds the world in his hand.

God is nourished at the breast, but he feeds angels. He is wrapped in swaddling cloths, but he clothes us with immortality.

[27 : 52] He is suckled, but he's adored. He does not find room in the inn, but he makes a temple for himself in the hearts of believers. God became a human being to set us free from living for ourselves.

I think it is right for us to fear eternal fire that our sins deserve. It is right for us to fear that. But Jesus does not want you to come simply with fear.

We're just saying it in Amazing Grace, the lyrics. It was grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved.

You've got to start with fear, but he doesn't want you to just come with fear. It was grace that my fears relieved. How does he do that?

The king sets us free from our sin by taking hell upon himself by going to the cross. God said, instead of me, the fruitless tree, the gardener was cut down.

[29 : 10] Instead of me, the chaff that should have been blown away, the farmer himself was thrown into the fire. God will love you.

God will love you. God will love you. He invites us to come to him to be set free, to give our total allegiance to him and receive the Holy Spirit that will change us from the inside out, to love God and love others as we're made for.

But he does it by his own death. death. His own death makes a temple for himself in the hearts of believers. So are you ready to meet the king?

are you ready to accept freedom on God's terms? Not freedom to sin, to keep living for yourself, but freedom to love and flourish under the king.

God has turned up. He's walked in the door. The time of God's rule has begun. The king is enthroned.

[30 : 28] His name is Jesus. Tomorrow might be freedom day from all the restrictions, but today he offers you freedom from your sin.

He offers you freedom from the consequences of your sin. He offers you a new beginning, a new life, knowing God as your father, loving him, and then that overflowing in loving others.

we've all got to face this king one day, an answer for our lives. Why not come to him today, confessing your sin, asking him to change you?

Will you pray with me? Father, let's pray. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for sending your son, not to condemn the world, but to save us.

We thank you that you came, Lord, not to be served, but to serve us by going to the cross in our place. Father, help each of us to hear your words in Matthew.

[31 : 52] Lord, help each of us not to trust in ourselves and be confident in ourselves to stand before you, but help us come to you. May our hearts be a wilderness as we come to you, and may you create new life in each one of us, the life you made us for, the life in your presence, knowing your love that even went to the cross for our sake.

Lord, create a garden in each one of us, set us free from a life lived for self, that we might love you as you deserve and love others as we ought to.

Lord, only your spirit can bring about this. My words can't, only your spirit can. Please, save each one of us, in Jesus' name. Amen.