

(4) Prepare the way!

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Date: 30 December 2007

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[0 : 0 0] The reading is Matthew chapter 3, and this is on page 975 of the Bibles. Matthew 3, beginning at verse 1.

In those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For 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.

Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Bear fruit in keeping with repentance, and 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.

[1 : 1 7] Even 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.

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 with fire.

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

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?

But Jesus answered him, Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness. Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him.

[2 : 2 7] And behold, a voice from heaven said, This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Thank you, Richard, for reading to us.

Let me add my word of welcome to Adrian. I know there are quite a few away still on holiday, so it's great to see many of you here with us this morning. Let me pray for us again before we start. Father God, we thank you so much for your word, the Bible.

We thank you for the truth that it contains. We thank you for the goodness contained in it. And so we ask, Father, that as we hear your word now, that you'd give us spiritual wisdom and insight.

Please soften our hard hearts. Please unstop our deaf ears. Please open blind eyes and change us. By your Holy Spirit, we pray. In Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. I wonder how many of you had parents or in-laws or family over for Christmas lunch with all the preparations needed to get ready for their arrival.

[3 : 33] So there's the cleaning of the house from top to bottom. It's tidying the kids' bedrooms, preparing the guest rooms, decorating the Christmas tree, hanging up the lights, cooking the turkey, laying the table, probably knocking back a couple of sherrys on the morning.

Before opening up the front door with a hearty Merry Christmas. When the families and in-laws come to visit, well, we need to be ready, don't we? Whatever it takes, you need to be ready.

And now that Christmas is out of the way, you may be thinking about New Year's. Having a party, who to have over, what to cook, what to wear, what music to put on, and all the other things needed to prepare and get ready for your guests' arrival.

Whenever we have friends come to say, whenever colleagues come over for dinner, when family comes to visit, we need to be ready. So how about if God came to visit?

How would you get ready for that? Friends and family is one thing, but the creator of the universe, coming to visit? Well, that's a different dimension altogether. How do you get ready for the arrival of God himself?

[4 : 45] Well, that was the question that the people were asking 2,000 years ago, just before Jesus Christ burst onto the scene. And it's a question that all of us need to be asking ourselves in 2007.

Because Jesus has promised to visit us once again, to return one day and judge the world. And if Jesus is coming back to judge the world, well, we need to be ready.

We don't need to make a fancy meal for him or buy some expensive gifts. But there is one thing we do need to do to be ready for his arrival.

And Matthew chapter 3 tells us what it is. If you're joining us here for the first time this morning, we are currently in a series looking at the opening chapters of Matthew's Gospel.

And right from the word go, all the focus has been on Jesus and what he's come to earth for. So in chapter 1, not only did we see that Jesus was born to save people from their sins, but we also saw that he was none other than God himself, Emmanuel, God with us.

[5 : 59] And in chapter 2, we saw that every detail surrounding Jesus' birth had been meticulously planned and prepared and promised in advance by God in the Old Testament.

This message is trustworthy. It's reliable. And now in chapter 3, Jesus is about to make his grand entrance on the stage of human history.

But God wants to make sure that we're all ready for his arrival. that we're ready to meet the Lord Jesus when he comes to visit.

And that's why he sent this man called John the Baptist to get people ready for Jesus' arrival. And John's message is loud and clear. We can see it there in verse 2.

Repent. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. This is the one thing that we need to do to get ready for Jesus' arrival.

[7 : 00] God wants all of us this morning, if we haven't done so already, to repent. So first, we'll consider what it means to repent. Then we'll look at the warning John gives to those who won't repent.

Finally, we'll see the promise for all those who do repent. And if you turn to the reverse side of your service sheet, you'll see there are a handout to show where we'll be going.

First then, repent of your sin. Because in verses 1 to 6, we are introduced to John the Baptist and his message of repentance. And it's quite a bizarre scenario.

As we see this homeless preacher wandering around in the wilderness, dressed, what with a dead camel skiing on his back, locusts in one hand, honey in the other, baptizing people, saying, repent, repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

On first reading it, it seems a bizarre scenario. But Matthew tells us exactly what's going on in verse 3. So look down at verse 3 with me. For 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 path straight.

[8 : 26] 700 years previously, God had promised to send someone in advance to prepare people for the arrival of Jesus. He would be a voice crying in the wilderness.

And John the Baptist is that someone. There he is, dressed like a prophet, the prophet Elijah. He's in the wilderness, crying out in a loud voice, repent. If you want to be ready for Jesus, this is what we need to do.

To repent. John says, the king's coming, the kingdom's at hand. So repent. Turn from your sin. Turn back to God. Repent. And the people did just that, verse 5.

Look at verse 5. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him. And they were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

In the light of Jesus' coming, the people confessed their sins. They acknowledged that they were in no state, no fit state, spiritually speaking, to meet God's king.

[9 : 32] I'm sure you've all seen those images of the England football captain, Bobby Moore, going up to collect the trophy from the queen after England won the World Cup in 1966.

And there he is, vigorously trying to clean his dirty, muddied hands before he shakes the queen's hands. He knew he was in no state to meet the queen. But he couldn't clean himself up.

The dirt just wouldn't come off. There was nothing he could do. And that's what it's like for the people here in Jerusalem, for you and I today. They knew they were in no state to meet the king, God himself, Jesus Christ.

They were spiritually dirty. They couldn't clean themselves up. They needed God to have mercy on them, to forgive them, to cleanse them. And so they turned to God and confessed their sins.

They repented. And we need to do the same today. Like the people back then, we need to heed John's command and repent.

[10 : 33] If you want to be ready for Jesus, whether it says at his second coming or when we die, we need to repent. Now, there are likes to be told they are sinful, let alone admit that they are sinful.

You only have to come along to Sunday school and see how the children struggle to say their sorry prayers to God. But the fact is that we are all spiritually unfit to meet Jesus.

None of us is good enough for God. We need to acknowledge it. We need to confess our sins, that we are spiritually unclean. We need to repent and turn back to God.

First then, repent of your sin. Secondly, repent of your sin or face the fire of God's wrath. Because in verses 7 to 10, John gives us a gracious warning behind this command to repent.

So look with me at verse 7. verse 7. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

[11 : 50] Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And 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.

Now clearly here the temperature is rising. John's language here is strong, it's emotive, it's controversial. After all, these Pharisees and Sadducees, they were the highly respected church members of their day.

And yet here he's calling them a brood of vipers. It's not very flattering. And the reason behind this is that their repentance is a sham. So they're coming to John for baptism, their confession of sin, it's mere pretense, a sham.

And so John challenges them on it. Did you see that in verse 8? He says, bear fruit in keeping with repentance. John is saying, look, if you're really repentant, well where's the fruit in your life?

If you were truly repentant, you would acknowledge your sin. You would realise that you're not spiritually fit to meet Jesus. As it happens, they're saying to themselves, oh we've got Abraham as our father.

[13 : 08] We're okay with God. God's on our side regardless. But John says, no, he's not. God could raise up children of Abraham even from these stones.

No true repentance, genuine repentance, leads to humility, before God, at least a confession of sin. There's no proud boasting in spiritual heritage or religiosity.

John says, look, your repentance is a sham. And so he warns them in verse 10, even 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. This is a picture of what Jesus will do when he comes in judgment, cutting down the fruitless trees, those whose repentance is fake, and throwing them into the fire.

We get a similar picture in verse 12. Jesus again, his winnowing fork in his hands, clearing his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

[14 : 26] And the warning is clear. The Pharisees and the Sadducees need to repent too. It doesn't matter who they are, how spiritually or religious they think they are, they need to repent.

Everyone on this planet needs to repent. Repent, says John, or you will face the fire of God's wrath. Now it's unfashionable today to speak of God's wrath, the judgment of God, or of hell.

But the Bible speaks very clearly about them. You can see for yourself the verses here, these are not my words, these are God's words. The wrath of God, judgment day, hell, they are all real.

And so we need to take this warning about them very seriously indeed. Yes, God is love, but God is also holy. And because God is holy, he must deal with all the evil, the injustice, all the sin in this world, including the sin in our own hearts.

And so when John says, look, the kingdom of heaven is at hand, he knows that God is about to deal with sin once for all. judgment is coming. And so he graciously warns everyone to repent before it's too late.

[15 : 55] I know the language is strong, it is, but I hope we see that John's warning is a loving thing to do. Like my dad once shouted to me to get out of the road because a car was about to hit me, warnings like this are loving things to do.

It may be unpleasant to hear, but it is for our good. our good. And it really is a loving thing for God to send John the Baptist to warn people, to warn us today of the coming judgment.

Repent or face the fire of God's wrath. Fire is often used in the Bible as a way of describing hell. We've already seen it in verse 10 and verse 12 and it is not just John the Baptist who speaks of hell in this way.

Jesus himself in chapter 5, twice, the hell of fire. Chapter 25, the eternal fire. Of course, fire is a metaphor, but John the Baptist and Jesus use it to describe just how horrific hell is.

It speaks of unimaginable pain and is to be avoided at all costs. I've had sunburn that's left me in pain for days.

[17 : 09] I've had someone accidentally stub a cigarette on my face. Incredible pain. You'll have experienced the pain of fire, I don't know, with an oven or a match or sparkler bonfire. Fire causes pain.

It's an easy metaphor to understand, but to begin to imagine the pain of an eternal fire, an unquenchable fire, being burnt alive forever, that the thought is unbearable.

And so John says, look, repent. Please repent. Stop playing games with God. It is not worth it. Turn to God.

Repent. If you're not a follower of Jesus Christ this morning, please repent. And the same goes for anyone here today who thinks they're okay with God because of their religious performance or their spiritual heritage.

And John says, you're not. You need to repent too. It doesn't matter if you've been born into a Christian family or grown up in Sunday school.

[18 : 20] It doesn't matter if you've been baptised, confirmed. It doesn't matter if you've been going to church for years. Know your Bibles really well. Think you're a good person. None of these things will get you ready for Jesus coming.

The only thing you can do to get ready for Jesus is to repent. Turn to God for forgiveness. Repent.

Please repent or face the unquenchable fire of God's wrath. Well, if that's the gracious warning behind this command to repent, finally, let's look at the gracious offer behind it too.

So our third point, repent and you will be safe on judgment day. So look with me at verse 11. I baptise you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I'm not worthy to carry.

He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John now shifts his attention away from himself and onto Jesus Christ.

[19 : 31] All I can do, says John, in baptism is make you wet on the outside, but Jesus can make you clean on the inside. He is far mightier because he can actually change your heart.

Jesus will baptise where it matters, not on the outside with water, but in the heart by the Holy Spirit. He's going to deal with sin. He's going to deal with sin once for all and make you safe on judgment day.

In other words, John's coming, it can only expose the problem of sin, but Jesus' coming will actually solve the problem of sin as he baptises with his Holy Spirit and with fire.

Just to be clear, we know John is talking about Jesus here. We know John is talking about Jesus here because Matthew makes the link for us in verse 13 that then Jesus came, and if that's not enough, by verse 17 we have God himself confirming it.

This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased. So there's no doubt here, Jesus is the one John had been preparing the people for. Jesus is the one God himself had promised years earlier.

[20 : 42] Jesus is the one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Now, what does that mean? Well, back in the Old Testament, the prophet Malachi had spoken of a future age when God would refine his people's hearts with a purifying fire.

And in the prophets, through the prophet Ezekiel, God had spoken of a future day when God himself would come and remove our hearts of stone and put his spirit in us. His spirit in us to turn us from sin and to move us into ever-increasing lives of holiness.

It would be a glorious future, God had promised, when his relationship with his people would be restored. I will be their God, he'd said, and they will be my people. Well, John is saying that that future is now.

Jesus is the one who will fulfil these prophecies. If you repent, he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit. He will change you from the inside out. If you repent, he will give you his spirit, he will cleanse you, he will purify you, he will turn you from sin and cause you to follow God in holiness.

Jesus will deal with the cause of sin. So repent, says John, receive God's spirit, and you will be safe on judgment day. It's a wonderful truth that Jesus deals with our sin, making us safe on judgment day, especially when we consider what it cost him.

[22 : 09] Because in verses 14 to 15, Jesus gets baptised, which you might have thought was a bit strange. Jesus has got nothing to repent of, Jesus has no sin to confess, but nevertheless he gets baptised, as if one of us, there Jesus is, standing with us, as if a sinner.

Why? Well, this isn't the end of the story, but come the end of his life, we see Jesus standing with us in the most loving way imaginable.

Because even though Jesus had no reason to die, he was sinless, even though Jesus had no sin to be punished, yet Jesus chose to die for us. To sacrifice himself for us.

To die in our place for our sin. Greater love has no one than this, that he will lay his life down for his friends. And that is what Jesus did for us, whilst we were his enemies.

Jesus loved us to the last, choosing to be nailed to a cross, and receive for himself the punishment you and I deserve for our sin.

[23 : 19] This is what it took to deal with the consequences of sin. Jesus was forsaken by God, so that we could be forgiven by God.

So this is the gracious offer behind John's command. Repent, turn from your sin, turn to Jesus, and you will be safe on judgment day.

We asked at the start, what would it be like, what would we do, how would we get ready if God came to visit? Well, the passage has been very clear. Repent, that's what you need to do.

None of us knows when we will die, or when Jesus Christ will return, tomorrow, next week, next year. We don't know, but one thing is for sure, all of us one day will meet Jesus face to face.

And to be ready, we need to repent. Either we repent now, and Jesus baptises us with his spirit and fire, or we refuse to repent, and Jesus will one day judge us with fire.

[24 : 29] It's either the purifying fire of God's spirit now, or the eternal fire of God's wrath later. And of course, it's not really an option, it's a command.

Repent, before it's too late, repent, and you will be safe. You will be safe on judgment day. And for those of us who have truly repented, I hope these verses come as a great assurance to us that we are safe.

It's wonderfully reassuring to know that if we've truly repented, Jesus has sent a spirit to live in us. God himself has taken residence in our hearts, that God is daily at work inside us, refining us, turning us from sin, purifying, bearing the fruit of the spirit, love for God, love for others, joy in Christ, peace with him and peace with others.

God is doing for us what we couldn't do for ourselves, ridding us of our sin, moving us to love God as we ought. Of course, this is a lifelong process, it won't be finished until we are with Jesus in the new heavens and the new earth, but please let it give you great confidence today that you will be safe.

As you daily battle with sin, as you daily feel that exposing work of the spirit in your heart towards sin, as you daily experience the fruit of the Holy Spirit, know that God is at work within you by his spirit, making you the person you ought to be, transforming you into the person he wants you to be, preparing you for judgment day, when he'll gather you into his arms, just like a farmer, gathering in the wheat to the barn.

[26 : 11] A life of perfect holiness waits us, free from sin, free from judgment, free to live with God and his people just as we were originally made to be. So keep trusting in Jesus' death for you, keep living by the spirit, keep asking God to turn you from sin, and following him and know you will be safe on judgment day.

Let's pray together. Father God, we thank you so much for sending John the Baptist to earth to prepare for Jesus' arrival.

We've heard the message here that we need to repent, we know Jesus is coming back. so we ask Father for those of us who haven't, we ask Father you'd move in us, grant us repentance, for those of us who have, whose work you are, your spirit that you've given us, we thank you for that.

And pray Father God that you would help us to keep living by the spirit, keep asking you to turn us from sin and to remind us of this great assurance that we have, that if we have truly repented, we will be safe on judgment day.

I ask you in Jesus' name, Amen.