

Preparing the way

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Preacher: Rev Prof Andrew McGowan

[0 : 00] This morning, we're going to consider the story of John the Baptist from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 3, verses 1-17.

In order to draw out the significance of the ministry of John the Baptist and also to identify lessons that can be learned for today, I want to divide what I have to say into three parts.

John's mission, John's message, and John's baptism. John's mission, John's message, and John's baptism.

First of all, then, John's mission. Why did John suddenly begin preaching in the desert of Judea?

What was his mission? In verse 3 of our passage, Matthew identifies him as the one spoken about by the prophet Isaiah.

[1 : 19] In Isaiah chapter 40 and verse 3, In other words, Matthew is telling us that John the Baptist was the one sent to prepare the way for the Lord.

We could also have looked at the last book of the Old Testament, the book of Malachi, which says that one in the spirit of Elijah would come before the Messiah.

And Jesus himself, when questioned about that, said that that was referring to John the Baptist. He is the one who was sent to prepare.

And these two words, sent and prepare, are important. That is to say, John did not wake up one day and decide to become a preacher.

He was sent by God. And also, his preaching had one specific objective, to prepare people for the coming of Jesus.

[2 : 42] Nothing more, nothing less. That was his calling, and that was his mission. And John, in his gospel, in chapter 1, verses 6 to 9, sums it up like this.

There came a man who was sent from God. His name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning the light, so that all through him might believe.

He himself was not the light. He came only as a witness to the light, the true light that gives light to every man.

He came only as a witness to the light that gives light to the light. And these words in John's gospel, there came a man who was sent by God.

That's the most important thing we can say about John the Baptist. He was on a mission because God had sent him.

[3 : 51] Like all the prophets who had gone before him, they were sent by God. The second most important thing is that he was a witness.

He was not trying to gather an audience for himself. He had no ambitions to be the great preacher that everyone came to hear.

He was a witness. His task was to point people to Jesus to prepare the way for him.

He must become greater. I must become less. I'm not worthy even to tie his sandals. He was always pointing away from himself to Jesus.

He was a witness. This man is the Messiah sent by God for whom you have been waiting. Although in Matthew's gospel, it might appear as if John the Baptist arrived out of nowhere, in Luke chapter 1, we're given the background to the story.

[5 : 11] Mary, Zechariah the priest and his wife had no children. But then an angel appeared to Zechariah to tell him that his wife was going to have a son.

And the boy who was subsequently born was named John. Mary, the mother of Jesus, also had a visit from an angel telling her that she was going to give birth to a son.

And we're told that Mary was a relative of Elizabeth. And indeed, she went to see Elizabeth when she heard that Elizabeth was going to have a baby.

And when we take all of that together, we can see several things. First, John the Baptist was actually a relative of Jesus, not just a stranger plucked out of obscurity.

Second, his birth, as well as that of Jesus, was announced by an angel. And third, his mission and the mission of Jesus himself were bound up together.

[6 : 30] It was one act of God that sent John to prepare the way and then sent his only son, Jesus, for our salvation.

Luke describes John's mission in chapter 1, verses 16 and 17. 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. That's a reference back to Malachi. 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.

Now, John the Baptist was a most unlikely beginning to a great work of God. The way he dressed.

[7 : 36] The food he ate. Locusts and wild honey. And the message he preached were all unusual. And yet there was a stamp of authority about John and what he said.

Matthew tells us people went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. And there was something about this man.

There was something about this man. And something about his preaching. And an authority about it. Which was different from all the other wandering rabbis and preachers and prophets.

The ordinary people recognized that here was a man sent by God. The people were convinced.

The leaders of the Jews were not convinced. You may remember that on one occasion Jesus challenged the Pharisees. And he said, well, John the Baptist, was he from men?

[8 : 41] Or was he from God? And they refused to answer. They said, well, if we say he was from men, the people will lynch us because they believe he was sent by God.

It was quite clear that the common people, those who heard him preaching, were absolutely convinced that this was a man who had been sent by God.

Some even thought that he might be the Messiah himself. But he was quick to say, no, that's not me. John's mission then was to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus.

But to establish how he did this, we move on to the next point, John's message. And John's message is found in the first two verses of our passage.

In those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the desert of Judea and saying, repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.

[9 : 55] John called people to repent. The word repent means to turn away from sin and back to God.

Turn away from sin and turn back to God. It's a movement. It's a movement. And that's what he called them to do. And as a sign of this repentance, they were to confess their sins and be baptized.

And many, many people were baptized by John in this way. The crowds flocked to hear him. They heard the message of repentance.

They confessed their sins and they were baptized in the Jordan River. But then the scene changed.

Verses 7 to 9. 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?

[11 : 05] 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 Jews would not have found it strange that John was baptizing people. There were occasions within the Jewish religion when baptisms took place.

But what did surprise them and angered many of them was that John required this baptism not only of outsiders and foreigners who became Jews, but he required it of the children of Abraham themselves.

John's baptism was a sign of repentance. And to suggest that Jews needed to repent was profoundly shocking to them.

You see, they imagined that because they were descended from Abraham, part of the Jewish people, that they didn't have to repent.

[12 : 22] That that was for those who were outsiders. That was for the Gentiles. Not for them. They believed that their position was established simply because of their birth and because of the community of which they were part.

And so, he denounced the Jewish religious establishment and saying that a blood relationship with Abraham was not the same as a spiritual relationship with God.

Let me say that again. A blood relationship with Abraham was not the same as a spiritual relationship with God.

And over the years in ministry, I found the same kind of thing among many people. People who have been associated with the church all their lives who are told that Christian faith requires that we be born again of the Spirit of God, they are angry sometimes because they don't believe that that message is for them.

But it remains true. But it remains true. Just as John came to the nominal Jews of his day and said, you must repent and turn to God.

[13 : 53] So, we must say the same to anyone who has never truly experienced God's power in their lives for new birth and new life and union with the Lord Jesus Christ.

There are no exceptions to the need to turn to God and turn away from sin. And that brings me to my third point, John's baptism.

John is known as John the Baptist because he was baptizing people in the Jordan River. But it's important to ask the nature of this baptism.

And the best way to understand it is to contrast John's baptism with Christian baptism. And the two things are not the same.

Christian baptism, as we know from the Scriptures, is a sign of our participation in the death and resurrection of Christ.

[15 : 03] As Paul says in Romans 6, all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.

It was the death and resurrection of Christ which purchased our salvation. And our baptism is a symbol of going down into the water and coming out again as a symbol of Christ's burial and resurrection.

But before the death and resurrection of Christ, there could be no Christian baptism because Christian baptism is a symbol of the death and resurrection of Christ applied to the individual believer.

So, what then was the baptism of John? Well, it was a baptism for the repentance of sins in preparation for the coming of the Messiah.

John preached that there must be a national repentance in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. And his baptism was for those who were willing to repent and to prepare themselves for Jesus' coming.

[16 : 25] But those who were baptized by John later still needed Christian baptism and the Holy Spirit.

In the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 19, verses 1 to 6, we read this. When Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus.

There he found some disciples and asked them, Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? They answered, No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.

So, Paul asked, Then what baptism did you receive? John's baptism, they replied. Paul said, John's baptism was a baptism of repentance.

He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is Jesus. On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus.

[17 : 40] And when Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. John's baptism, then, was not a substitute for Christian baptism or a substitute for salvation in Christ.

It was a preparation. And John himself makes this clear in verses 11 and 12 of our passage. I baptize you with water for repentance, but after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I'm not fit to carry.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. This baptism with the Holy Spirit refers to our new birth.

When we are born again of the Spirit of God, we are baptized in the Holy Spirit. During the 1960s, there was, I think, some confusion in the minds of many who believed that first of all, you become a Christian and then later you are baptized in the Holy Spirit.

But it seems clear to me from Scripture that these two things are the same, that the baptism with the Holy Spirit is what brings new birth and joins us together spiritually with the Lord Jesus Christ.

[19 : 20] Only those who are in Christ have the Holy Spirit. Paul says in Romans 8 and 9, if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.

And the act of God whereby he gives us new birth and unites us to Christ is the baptism in the Holy Spirit.

Listen to 1 Corinthians 12 and 13. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free, and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

The most surprising thing about John's baptism is that Jesus himself came to be baptized by John.

And many people have been puzzled by this because after all, if John's baptism was about repenting of sins and turning back to God, surely Jesus would not need to be baptized for there was no sin in him.

[20 : 38] He was without sin, as the Scripture says. He didn't need to repent and turn back to God. So why should he be baptized?

In fact, in verses 30 to 15 of our passage, John raises that very objection. John said, I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?

Jesus replied, let it be so now. It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.

And the problem, the theological problem here is real. If John's baptism was about the removal of filth from the soul, why did the sinless one present himself for baptism?

Well, the answer is that he took our sin and was baptized on our behalf. In other words, his baptism was an expression of solidarity with us in our sinful condition.

[21 : 57] Isaiah 53, we all like sheep have gone astray, but the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

John 1 29, look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. 2 Corinthians 5 and 21, God made him, Jesus, who had no sin to be sin for us, that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Jesus was not baptized to rid himself of sin. He was baptized on our behalf as the one who had come to bear our sin and take that sin all the way to the cross and pay the penalty for that sin so that we don't have to pay that penalty ourselves.

And then something remarkable happens. After Jesus is baptized, he comes up out of the water and heaven is opened and the Spirit of God comes like a dove and a voice from heaven says, this is my Son whom I love.

With him I am well pleased. There are two things here. First of all, it was not just John the Baptist who witnessed to Jesus.

[23 : 38] God himself witnessed. This is my Son. This is my Son. God was telling them that Jesus was Messiah.

And the second thing was the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus. Now again, that's a puzzle. Surely, Jesus as God incarnate had the Holy Spirit with him throughout his life.

Why did he need the Holy Spirit to come upon him? Well, in fact, what's happening here is a special anointing of the Holy Spirit for his ministry which is about to begin.

It's not a change in Jesus, his person, or his status as one scholar said, but rather a new epoch in God's plan of redemption was beginning.

So, in conclusion, this chapter of Scripture represents an important turning point in the history of God's dealings with human beings.

[25 : 00] The prophecies have been fulfilled. John has heralded his coming and Jesus will now begin his public ministry.

And at the beginning of that public ministry, God speaks from heaven and bears witness to his Son. If we are not yet Christians, we need to hear the message of John the Baptist to turn away from our sins and turn back to God.

Always remembering that we can only do so in the power of the Holy Spirit and because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross at Calvary.

Amen.