

Matthew 3:1-17

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[0 : 00] Father in heaven, will you this morning show yourself to your people in your word?! Will you, this morning, show yourself to your people in your word.

! We pray that in the name of Jesus, who we see as beloved son in this text. Amen.

If you've been with us in this series through Matthew, you are already primed for what Matthew is doing here in this text.

Especially last week when we saw fulfillment after fulfillment after fulfillment of the Old Testament in Christ's ministry.

Today in the first few verses of our text, we see God bringing about the fulfillment of his promises.

[0 : 59] And it's beautiful. 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.

And here's an interesting verse. Verse four. Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist and his food was locusts and wild honey.

What's that got to do with anything? Well, John the Baptist is dressed here very much like the prophet Elijah. And we are to see him as such, the forebear, the one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.

And just like we saw last week in Matthew chapter two, that's an introduction to something. When I say to you, we hold these truths to be self-evident, you immediately think of the whole declaration of independence, right?

When Matthew quotes for us here, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. This is an introduction to something, to something, a bigger passage.

[2 : 19] It's Isaiah chapter 40. And Isaiah's, in the Jewish consciousness, the greatest of the prophets. And Isaiah chapter 40 marks a big shift in his ministry and in the book of Isaiah.

And so this would have been a very familiar turn of phrase for them. And they would have thought, oh, it means something else. It means something more.

And in fact, when Luke recounts this baptism in his gospel, Luke chapter three, he goes on to quote more of Isaiah chapter 40.

A voice cries in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low.

The uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

[3 : 26] Isaiah is priming us for two things. Isaiah 40 verse 4, he is prepping us for what you might call tectonic shifts.

Right? On the one hand, this is great, great news, right? Mountains are dangerous. Valleys are treacherous. Uneven and rough terrain are difficult. What does God mean by this metaphor?

He will remove the barriers that stand between his people and himself. And it pictures a day when he will remove those barriers completely.

And he will transform the world and the way it works. And so, verse 4, it's good news. It's great news for his people.

But, on the other hand, that's kind of troubling, isn't it? How do you bring down a mountain? How do you level and smooth out the earth?

[4 : 41] When God removes the barriers between himself and his people, it will be a great disruption, we might say.

Isaiah is priming us for a second thing. In verse 5 of chapter 40, God will reveal his glory.

He will display his glory before his people. And these two things are what John is going to proclaim in his message.

That tectonic shifts are coming to remove the barriers between God and man. But those barriers are not outside of us.

They're not external to us. They are not something that is imposed on us. They are actually inside of us, inside of our hearts. We are, in fact, the barriers.

[5 : 54] That's why he begins saying, repent. And then God will appear in glory. Which is why he says the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

And so these two ideas, the world-altering shifts that break mountains and raise valleys, the barriers between God and his people, and God revealing his glory to his people, that actually is going to become the outline of our passage today.

So first we begin with these tectonic shifts. As John says in verse 5, repent. 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.

What separates us from the blessedness of God? In chapter 1, an angel announced to Joseph that Jesus was to be born.

And he said to him, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from Rome, from oppression, from poverty, no, from their sins.

[7 : 36] The thing that separates us from God, from his blessedness, from real fellowship with the living God, from our true humanity, is our own sin.

And so the people come confessing their sins. Now, you might think that you don't really need to confess your sins. You know, even if you have some, right?

You know, even if you do have them, maybe you don't really need to do much about them. After all, nobody's perfect, right? But that's not how God sees it. Not at all.

Jesus is going to begin, in chapter 5, teaching the Sermon on the Mount, his most famous servant, and he's going to show us our own hearts.

Have you ever wished someone was out of your life? Just go on. Like they were dead to you. You never saw them again. I have.

[8 : 49] I mean, not that you actually killed them, whether they were a gun or a knife, but in your heart, they were dead to you. That is bitterness and hatred.

before a holy God, that is a murderous heart. The kind of heart, that kind of heart, is what cuts us off from God.

Today, and when we die, will cut us off from him forever. So, the people come, and they confess their sins because they are confronted with this truth.

That they are sinners before a holy God, and they are in need of redemption, and they are baptized. That is, they are immersed in the water as a sign of their contrition over sin.

And so, that is it, right? They are good to go. Admit, I am a sinner. Do a ritual. We are good. All the valleys are lifted up, and the mountains are laid low, right?

[10 : 02] Right there. We have demolished the obstacles that stand between God and man, right? Well, John doesn't think so.

He continues in verse 7. 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? 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. 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.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees come to John, and he essentially tells them that they aren't worthy of his baptism. Now, if you have a good working knowledge of the Bible, you know that the Pharisees and the Sadducees don't really enjoy a very good reputation.

[11 : 15] In this passage, John calls them vipers. Later, Jesus is going to call them hypocrites, whitewashed tombs. We might be forgiven for thinking that everybody there thought the same way about them, but that's not the case.

Most people thought pretty highly of these guys, especially the Pharisees. Here was a group that took the Scriptures very seriously, sought to put them into practice in every aspect of their lives.

They honored their elders. That is one of the things they are renowned for in the histories. These were the good guys, the upstanding citizens, the moral leaders of their people.

And it's these men that John calls a brood of vipers. If they don't make the cut, if John turns them away, what hope does anyone else have?

In fact, when Luke reports these same events in Luke chapter 3, he doesn't even mention the Pharisees and the Sadducees. He says this to the whole crowd.

[12:22] And so, the Pharisees and the Sadducees are standing in as the best of them. And even they are not worthy of this repentant baptism. John's words apply to the masses.

Confessing your sins when you're the best mankind has to offer, that's the Pharisees and the Sadducees, doesn't save you. Confessing sin when you're in the right crowd.

He says, don't presume to call Abraham your father. That doesn't save you. Some of you show up at church. They're like, yeah, I'm in the right crowd.

That doesn't save you. Just being here, sitting in a seat. Has not reconciled you to the living God. The consequences of this are dire.

He says, there is an axe. There is wrath to come. There is fire. What's needed, then? What do we need?

[13:35] John doesn't just demand a simple confession of sin. He says, bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Where does fruit come from? Jesus is going to explain it to us in chapter 7, saying, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit.

A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

the Pharisees are hosed. And so are the multitudes who went to John. And so are you, and so am I. The fruit of our lives, the life that we lead, it comes from somewhere. And it's not the soil that we're planted in, it's not our circumstances, it's not the climate the tree grows in, it's not our, you know, relationships.

[14:53] It's not the geography, it's not the pruning. Fruit comes from fruit trees wherever they are planted. Thorns come from thorn bushes.

And if we produce thorns like hatred, even subtle hatred like we talked about before, it means we are thorn bushes.

And our fruit is an act. And there is an axe aimed at the root. And fire awaits us.

Because there is a God in heaven who is good. Perfectly good. And that's actually a problem for thorn bushes. Jesus. So when John tells even the best of men they don't deserve to come to his baptism, that instead they should bear fruit that is contrary to their nature, contrary to our nature. How does a thorn bush become a fruit tree? How does a leopard change its spots? what they needed, what we needed, what we need today is transformation.

[16:18] To be made a new creation. And that's not something that they or we can do. Thorn bushes cannot make themselves anything.

They cannot improve themselves to the point where they suddenly start bearing fruit. In chapter 19, Jesus' disciples will be greatly astonished and ask this same question, who then can be saved?

And Jesus will look at them and answer, with man it is impossible. impossible. But, with God, all things are possible.

And in verse 11, John takes our eyes off of ourselves. It's impossible with us. And points them to the Lord.

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.

[17:36] He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His 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.

John's saying here that the baptism he offers is an outward sign but God is coming and God is the author of a spiritual baptism.

What his people truly need, one that transforms them. It's a story here of two fires as it were.

One in verse 11 and one in verse 12. The first, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. This is how the leopard changes its spots.

It goes to God. God comes and intervenes. This is how a thorn bush becomes a fruit tree. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit into the heart and does the impossible.

[18 : 46] He makes us new. We spoke these words together today. If anyone is in Christ, he is an improved thorn bush?

No. He is a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come. All this is from God. The leopard didn't change his own spots. Who, through Christ, reconciled himself? us to himself. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.

Now, how does this relate to John's words, bear fruit, keeping with repentance?

The transformation God works in our hearts is the only way. God in Ezekiel chapter 11, long before Christ came, here is what the Lord promised to do through his work.

[20 : 11] I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh. That's the thorn bush, the old man, the natural us. And give them a heart of flesh.

That's our new birth in Christ, where he, by the power of the Holy Spirit, makes us a new creation. And watch how he connects it. That they may walk in my statutes, and keep my rules, and obey them.

There's the fruit. The natural outpouring of the new birth that he has already given his people. But it gets better because Ezekiel concludes, they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

Remember, Isaiah pointed to tectonic shifts and God revealing his glory. And so it is God who makes new creations, and of course they bear fruit, keeping with their new nature.

Right? Not to become a new nature, but because he has made them new. If he made you a fruit tree, you will, because you're a fruit tree, bear fruit.

[21 : 25] That's what fruit trees do. If he made you a fish, you will, because you're a fish, swim in the water. That's what fish do. If he made you an eagle, you will, because you're an eagle, fly.

That's what eagles do. a new and if he makes you a new creation, if he makes you born again, if he makes you a Christian, you will, because you're a Christian, bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

That's what Christians, new creations in Christ, do. And so it's not the fruit that earns a new birth.

It is our grace given, blood bought, new birth that produces a harvest of righteousness in us. That is who we are in Christ.

And so the first fire that John points to is that the Lord is going to bring a refiner's fire for those who want to be made new.

[22 : 37] To all who would receive him, who believe in his name, who trust in his work, he makes the fire of the Holy Spirit. He makes them a new creation.

John says that the second fire will look different. Verse 12, his winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn.

That is that the good fruit, the new creation, those he has made excellent, made new. So those are the people who have had the refiner's fire. But, he says, the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

And this is as simple as it is uncomfortable. The Lord is coming with ferocious holiness.

One writer put it this way, rejection of Christ will simply not go unpunished. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. But there is good news, isn't there?

[23 : 50] Because he led with the good news. He will baptize all who call on his name in the Holy Spirit. He will make them a new creation and adopt them into his family.

And so, as we remember at the beginning, Matthew introduces us to this passage and basically gives us the outline from Isaiah chapter 40. First, there are these tectonic shifts that destroy the barriers between God and man.

And it's actually God who reaches into our hearts and levels the mountains and raises up the valleys and destroys the things in our hearts that prevent us from fellowshiping with him.

To crush our hearts of stone and to restore fellowship with him. And then the second thing that Isaiah anticipated in chapter 40 verse 5. is that God would arrive and show his glory because that's the whole point.

That's the whole point. The glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

[25 : 01] And that's not figurative language. That's exactly what happens in verse 13. then Jesus came.

There it is. 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. Jesus came to be baptized. That doesn't make sense.

John said it himself. Baptism is about repentance. Jesus, the incarnate son of God, did not need to repent of anything. Anything at all. So what's going on here?

John wants to know. Jesus gives a most interesting answer. Let it be so now for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.

[26 : 12] But I thought Jesus was already righteous. Right? It isn't and it wasn't his righteousness that he was filling up.

He was baptized for us. Matthew has been using the word fulfill to indicate that Jesus was accomplishing what the Lord had promised in the scriptures before.

What did the Lord promise about righteousness when he came? When he sent the Messiah, the Savior? In Isaiah chapter 53, a famous passage about the coming Savior, he promised this, out of the anguish of his soul, he shall see and be satisfied.

By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

Therefore, I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors.

[27 : 35] Yet he bore the sin of many and makes intercession for the transgressors. What do we see there? The Lord promised that he would send a righteous one who would experience anguish, pour out his soul to death, be counted, numbered with the transgressors, bear their iniquities through his anguish, and make many to be accounted righteous.

And so, we see here today, in Matthew chapter 3, that the righteous one went down into the waters of baptism, not for his own sake, but in order to identify himself with those who desperately need righteousness and repentance.

He is fulfilling that part of Isaiah where he said he was numbered with the transgressors in order to bear their sins and make intercession for them.

remember, that's you and me, not somebody else. He bound himself to their cause for all who would return from self and sin to him.

His payment for sin is effective and his righteousness fills up their account. For our sake, the Father made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

[29 : 33] God in Colossians chapter 2 the Apostle Paul tells us that our baptism points to this work of the Holy Spirit who unites believers to the Son in his death and in his resurrection so that all of that can be true of us.

Because it wouldn't be any good for us if Jesus came and died and rose again if he didn't offer to number himself among the transgressors to number himself among us.

If we are not his people then his death and resurrection don't apply to us. But he came and he begins his ministry by counting himself among a people who in their hearts are contrary to him. Isaiah anticipated that God would arrive and he does in verse 13 then Jesus came. God arrives here in verse 13 to show us his glory a love so great that it would die for those who turned their backs on him but in verse 16 God arrives doesn't he?

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 coming coming to rest on him and behold a voice from heaven said this is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased and so we see here so clearly set before us the triune God now we can sit here and say here are some facts about the trinity right there is one God who exists eternally in three persons we can say true things about him he is one in substance and three in person not dividing the divinity nor confusing the persons but that's not what he's showing us here not just simple facts about his existence as incredible as that is he's pointing us to something more

[32 : 15] God is showing himself in a very very unique way what do we see the God of the universe who created all things who rules all things who upholds all things is a father who delights in his son in the bond of their spirit the triune God is showing us his heart and he says this is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased and that's why the scriptures say God is love all the way down all the way down he's not first all powerful he's not first the creator he is first a father loving his son in the bond of their spirit that is who he is and that's why the scriptures say God is love that is why the scriptures tell us to call him father because that is first and foremost who he is it's not just a nice title it is his very nature and why does that matter why do we care about this why does he show us this mystery that we can't fully comprehend the Lord wants to reveal himself to his people he's before all things above all things he is the great treasure there's no greater gift that he can give to us than himself and so he delights to show himself to his people that's why he took it upon himself to save sinners to reconcile them to himself so that he may be in fellowship with them forever when we look at this passage we see a taste of heaven right heaven's not where we hang out on clouds with harps while boredom slowly rots us for all eternity that is a secular vision of heaven from people who know nothing of heaven's treasure

God himself heaven's treasure is the triune God who undertook to save his people reveal himself to them and bind himself to them in the redemptive covenant of the son's blood so that they might become his blood bought children and that binding is what we see here as Jesus undertakes a baptism that he does not need but he is numbering himself among the transgressors so that he may draw them to himself in a bond of family fellowship forever John Calvin put it this way the sum of the gospel is that God through his son takes away our sins but not just that the sum of the gospel is that God through his son takes away our sins and admits us to fellowship with him in this passage we see

Jesus he's identified he's extolled and he is offered to us he is offered to us by the father that we may rely on this pledge of our adoption and boldly call God himself our father that's the gospel that's what it's all about that's what this universe is all about and so if you have never received this gift if you have never turned from self and sin and gone to Christ who was not ashamed to be numbered among the transgressors will you feel the need for redemption today not just redemption but reconciliation not just a pass out of hell but adoption into his family run to this great savior who the righteous chose to be baptized and counted among the transgressors to bear your sin on his cross and also to fill up your account with his own righteousness so you can be adopted into his family forever will you turn to him will you be rescued by the righteous one who is numbered among the transgressors will you be reconciled to the triune

God will you be born again into his power living a life as a redeemed child of God who will then bear fruit good and pleasing fruit today and living with the hope of an eternity spent with this God this great father and for those of us who have already experienced this salvation how great a salvation is it will you in your heart worship him and will you look at him fully today and see all the way down into the heart of God God is love a father who loves his son in the bond of their spirit and will you also fulfill!

your calling as those who are born anew will you actually be Christians and bear fruit in keeping with your repentance for those of us who are in Christ and made new already I will point you to Titus chapter 2 verses 11 through 14 we won't read it today I was tempted to make this sermon almost about that but this is it ties something together so well for us in Titus chapter 2 Paul says that God's grace God's grace trains us to renounce ungodliness and to live godly lives in the present age it is his grace that does that he who has ears to hear let him hear if you have already experienced this grace as well let me encourage you to consider have you in your mind reduced the gospel to

[39 : 35] Jesus counted among the transgressors so that he might pardon their sins period or have you in view a full gospel that God sent his son to be numbered among the transgressors to bear their sin to redeem them from their iniquities in order to be reconciled to him and find full fellowship with him forever is that the gospel you believe in is that the gospel that you wake up each morning and tell yourself and say not only am I forgiven but I am forgiven and brought adopted into the family of God and I will fellowship and dives into his word to hear from him is reconciliation and genuine fellowship with God part of what you think of when you think of the gospel and last

John asked the first actually the first words he says are who warned you to flee from the wrath to come and I'll ask you who will you warn and not just give a warning but also point them to a treasure because it's not just a fiery furnace on the one hand and something neutral on the other but the

treasure of all treasures God himself given to and for us friends let's pray heavenly father you astonish us with your great grace and your great love thank you that you sent your son who did not need to be baptized but chose in love for us to be numbered among transgressors like us not just so that we might be pardoned but so that we might be brought into his family into your family Lord will you make the ministry of his reconciliation vibrantly alive to our hearts the thing that we desire may our lives as Christians be marked by a living fellowship with the living God and father if there is anyone here today who has not been redeemed by this savior will you work in their hearts to cause them to turn from sin and self to you and your great love will you even this moment make them a new creation in Christ for their great good and joy and for your glory we pray that in the matchless name of Jesus Christ our King Amen why don't you stand and join us in worship