

# Water and Fire

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 22 April 2018

Preacher: The Venerable Daniel Gifford

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, I want to echo David's welcome to all of you and to those who might be returning back. I know there's a couple of you who have been away for quite a long time. Welcome back. We are in a series on the Gospel of Matthew, and it is wonderful to be diving into this.

We're right towards the beginning. We're on Matthew 3, page 808, and we're looking on this passage on a very warm and sunny day with many flowers blooming and trees blossoming.

There is a sunny week ahead. There is a promise of warmth and no rain, a new season, new beginnings, we hope. And this is appropriate because, and very timely, because this passage is all about new beginnings, about newness.

That's what the good news is about. There's new birth. There's new covenant relationship with God. There are new hearts that God gives to us, new mercies that He gives us every morning.

And one day there's a new heaven and a new earth. How does this happen? How can this possibly happen in this world that is often dark and broken?

[ 1 : 1 5 ] Well, in our Matthew reading today, if you jump down to chapter 3, verse 13, you will see three words that change everything in this world, in the universe, and in your life.

Three words. It happens for the first time here in Matthew. Then Jesus came. Then Jesus came.

Those words are earth-shaking words. Because Jesus from Nazareth is God bringing a new rule with eternal new beginnings that are all about a new relationship with God.

Jesus comes in verse 13, and things are never, ever the same again. And I want to talk a little bit about what that means for us.

What does it mean that Jesus came? It is about three new beginnings and three endings that go with that.

[ 2 : 2 2 ] So when Jesus came, He brought a new fulfillment of God's promises. And He also brought an end to the waiting. And secondly, in verses 5 through 10, the fact that Jesus has come means that He brings a new people into existence with new hearts.

And He brings the end of spiritual entitlement. Spiritual entitlement. And then finally, at the end, verses 11 through 17, when Jesus came, He brings a new filling by God Himself that makes us completely different.

And He brings an end to spiritual emptiness, to that separation from the God who is the giver of all good things. He brings an end to that.

So I want to talk about those three things. It has been 30 years since David's sermon last Sunday. This is where we're at in Matthew. And we are in the wilderness.

And this is a very significant place to be in, in this chapter. Jesus starts His ministry here. John is ministering here. And the desert is about new beginnings in the Old Testament.

[ 3 : 45 ] So if you think about it, after escaping slavery in Egypt, the Hebrew people go into the wilderness as God's new people who are preparing to go into a new land that has been promised to them.

And then after the terrible failure of Israel, they are deported to Babylon. And they are in captivity there. But when they come back, as they are brought back, they go through the wilderness.

And the prophets say that place is a place of new beginnings. Isaiah has this great theme of the blossoming of the wilderness. Because through that wilderness, they're going to a new start.

When God's people will rebuild Jerusalem. And they will rebuild the temple. And they will again renew this faithful life to God together. But if you've read the Old Testament, you know that those new beginnings ended with failure.

The failure of God's people to follow through with their faithfulness. And to overcome the problem of sin. A problem that affects each one of us here as we are listening to God's Word.

[ 5 : 00 ] And God's people longed for him to act decisively. To change their hearts forever. To set up his gracious rule.

To make things right in that rule. And the prophets promised that this day would come. I want you to give an example of this.

If you turn back five pages to page 803. It's right at the very end of the Old Testament. And as you're turning those pages.

Just think that you're going back four and a half centuries. And this is the last time God is speaking. And he says this. Verse five and six.

Behold, I, God, will send you Elijah the prophet. Before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children.

[ 5 : 57 ] And the hearts of children to their fathers. Lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction. It's an amazing promise.

Because it says God will come. God will change hearts. So that people won't experience God's judgment. Which they deserve. And if you look up at verse three.

He says on that day God's going to bring healing. And a great joyous freedom to people. So that they'll be like leaping calves being released from a stall into a big field.

Where they can jump around as much as they want to. It's a picture of freedom and joy. Of God coming into their life. There's a freedom.

That was the last word from God. And at Matthew 3 there had been 450 years of silence. And God's people waited and waited and waited.

[ 6 : 57 ] For God to speak again. For God to act in power as he promised. And this affected their gatherings like we have right now. So their synagogue gatherings week by week.

The last prayer of the liturgy each week was this. Prayer. May God let his kingship rule in your lifetime. And in the lifetime of Israel.

Speedily. And soon. You see that was their hope. That's what they were yearning for. And those prayers were answered. From all those years.

When a man named John. Who looks a lot like Elijah. In verse four. He begins to preach in the wilderness. In the beginning of our chapter. And his message is.

That you must prepare yourselves. And repent. Because the promised king. And his kingdom. Is close by. God is doing a new thing. And he says.

- [ 7 : 59 ] That he. John. Fulfills God's word. Through Isaiah. Centuries before. Because he is the voice. Of one crying in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord.
- Make his paths straight. It's an incredible claim. When you read it closely. Because John says. That his role. Is the one who prepares the people for.
- God himself. Not just an earthly great king. Or a messiah. Which was the hope of the people. But to prepare the people. For God himself.
- To come. It's an amazing claim. And it is only because Jesus. Came. Those three words. That all God's promises.
- His loving plan. Of salvation. From the beginning of creation. Can come true. It can only come true. Because Jesus. Is that God. Who comes.
- [ 8 : 54 ] To change everything. And he does. He brings an end. To the waiting. If you have been waiting. For peace with God. If you have been waiting. For purpose.
- In your life. If you have been waiting. For hope. In your future. Or waiting. For the healing. Of your soul. Your mind. And your body. Your wait.
- Is over. John says. God. Has come. In Jesus. He fulfills it all. In Jesus. The great. And awesome.
- Day of the Lord. Has come. And he has come. For you. That's what it means. That your waiting is over. That's what it means. That all God's promises.
- Are fulfilled. For you. And for your salvation. Now there's a second implication. Of Jesus. Came. To us. And that is.
- [ 9 : 49 ] Not only does he bring. Fulfillment of God's promises. But he brings. A new people. Into existence. With new hearts. And an end. Also. To entitlement.
- John. In his preaching. Said there's one thing missing. For you all. One thing's missing. That to absolutely. That you absolutely. Have to have. If you are going to receive.
- That king. If you are going to be ready. For God to come. To us. And did you see it. In verse three. It is a big. Straight.
- Highway. For the Lord. That's what's missing. That's what needs. To be prepared. And according to John. That highway. Is not made of. Bricks.
- And stone. And mortar. Which the great. Highways. Of Rome. Were made of. He said. This highway. Is made up. Of repentance. It is the way.
- [ 10 : 43 ] That God brings. His newness. Into our life. And changes it. Forever. This week. As I was thinking. About repentance. I came across.
- A story called. How Sweden. Changed. Overnight. Now I don't know. If any of you read this. But it's about. A year. 1967. In which Sweden. Decided.
- That they would take on. The most expensive. And biggest. Traffic conversion. Project. That Europe. Had ever seen. It was a nationwide. Mission.
- And you know. What it was. To change. From. Driving on. The left side. Of the road. To drive on. The right side. Of the road. And the reason. They did that. Was because. Most of their cars.
- Were already. Left hand cars. They were influenced. By Europe. And that's. Mostly what they had. And it wasn't that. Safe to drive. On the left side. Of the road.
- [ 11 : 38 ] But more importantly. They also wanted. To join the more. Enlightened. And developed. Countries of the world. That drive on the right. Side of the road. It was.
- It was. It was. You must repent. David. It was a massive. Undertaking.

And it had to be. Implemented. In less than a day. And in the run up to. It was called. H day. By the way. H is a long word. In Swedish. Which I cannot pronounce. But it means.

Drive. On the right side. Of the road. Day. And. And what they had to do. Is they had to change. The door buses. The doors of the buses. To the other side. Of the buses.

They had to relocate. Bus stops. Road markings. All of them. Traffic lights. They had to redesign. Intersections. Bicycle lanes. One way streets. Had to be different.

[ 12 : 32 ] And. The amazing thing is. In the 24 hours. Before the change. It was going to take place. At exactly. 5 a.m. On a Sunday. 360,000 street signs.

Had to be switched. Throughout the whole nation. So. The military. Had to help. All those city workers. To make it happen. But you know. They did it. So early in the morning.

On Sunday. September 3rd. 1967. Cars started. Very carefully. And slowly. Driving on the right side. Of the road. And the predicted. Mass chaos.

Did not happen. It went very. Very smoothly. In fact. There were a third. Less fatalities. In Sweden. In the year after. From the year before.

That makes sense. They were driving rightly. And I tell this story. Not to shame. My brothers and sisters. From left hand driving.

[ 13 : 27 ] Countries. But I tell this story. Because spiritually. John is also calling. The people of God. To the same. Massive. Complete.

Change of direction. In their lives. So he is calling them. And really us too. To think about that person. That you cannot forgive. Can you turn away from that.

And turn to God. What about that area. In your life. In your work. That is a compartment. That says. God not allowed. What do we do about that compartment?

Do we repent. And give him rule over that compartment? Is there a resentment. To the generosity. That God might be calling you to.

Of what you have. Do I feel like that is not something. That God has a right to. Is there a hurt. That I am holding on to.

[ 14 : 25 ] That makes me feel. Pretty powerful. And self-righteousness. And self-righteousness is a big problem. You know. Do you feel. Pretty proud of the fact.

That you ran in the sun run today. Well I guess none of you did. Do you feel proud. Do you feel proud. Do you feel proud of the fact. That you did not run in the sun run today. Repentance is to turn.

Away from that self-righteousness. There is a disgust. That often we can feel. About those who think differently to us. Do we feel that. Towards people in our life.

Do we need to turn away from that. And to God. There are so many practical implications. To this repentance. That John is calling us to. It reaches into all areas of our life.

It reaches deep into us. And it is a change. Towards what God designed us to do. Just as in Sweden. There was a change.

[ 15 : 21 ] So that the cars were designed to drive. In that way. John was preaching. That the whole nation must repent. And it was a shocking thing to preach.

Because they were God's people. Entitled to God's favor. They had God's law. They were owed God's blessing. For working hard to follow it. But all of them. Had the sin problem.

That you and I have. Their hearts were far from God. They were not willing. To submit to God's rule. And you know. John's preaching of repentance. To prepare.

For God to come into their lives. Struck a chord. Social media was very different back then. But it was very. Very effective. John's preaching went viral.

And so you see. Jerusalem. Judea. The surrounding countryside. All over Israel. People were flocking. Looking. To hear that message. Which was not. A comfortable message.

[16:18] And many confessed their sins. And they were baptized. They were committing to a new life. With God as king. Over every aspect of their life. There was a great eagerness. To go into that new life.

That John was preaching about. So those crowds. Were agreeing with John. That you can't rely. On your religious pedigree. Your religious activity. You have to turn 180 degrees.

From a self-centered life. And self-righteous life. And to come to the king. For mercy. And for forgiveness. And for his peace.

And as you see in this passage. The biggest resistance. To that change. And to that new life. Of repentance. Were in the form. Of the powerful religious leaders.

Called Pharisees. And Sadducees. Who were responsible. For teaching. God's people. They were impressive people. As you probably know. They came to check out.

[17:14] John's baptism. Not to receive it. They came to criticize it. And fearless John. Was clearly not taking notes. In his seminary preaching class.

Or in his welcoming. To church class. Because he said to them. In verse 7. You brood of vipers. Who warned you. To flee from the wrath to come.

Bear fruit. In keeping with repentance. Don't presume to say to yourself. We have Abraham for our father. For I tell you. God is able. From these stones.

To raise up children for Abraham. And even now. An 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.

Wow. That's a strong word there. These leaders. Had a strong sense. And probably the strongest sense. In the world. Of entitlement.

[18:10] To God's favor. That's because. They knew they were God's chosen people. They were God's leaders. They lived exemplary lives. As an example. To the rest of Israel.

They knew the Bible better. Than anyone else. And they were pretty well off. Which showed. That God. Must be blessing them. But John says.

The unthinkable. He says. You are under judgment. That you are under his wrath. Because you are resisting God. Because you resist.

His rule in Jesus. Your hearts are actually. Dead towards God. They are like stones. That we see all around us. In the wilderness here. And Jesus will later say.

That they are like whitewashed tombs. That look great on the outside. But the inside. There is death. Spiritual death. Their hearts being far from God. And spiritually dead.

[19:06] And so Jesus says to them. Turn around. Don't just say the words. The right words of repentance. It is urgent that you bear fruit.

That you live for him. In those practical ways. That I was talking about before. Humbly come to your king. Live for him. In all the relationships.

Of your lives. Don't presume. That you are God's children. You know. In verse 9. He is saying. Right now. Even the stones. Have more chance. Of being God's true people. Than you do. And I think that John's words.

Are very relevant. Both for those of us. Who have been Christian for a long time. And also for those. Who have not yet thought. Of receiving Jesus as your king.

Because we can feel. That God has not. Doesn't have the right. To judge us. We are owed the very best. Because we live good lives. We are spiritually entitled.

- [ 20 : 04 ] It's our pedigree. But God tells each of us. Through John. That we have a sin problem. That we rebel against God. And that the only way.
- To know God's blessings. Is by coming. To this king Jesus. Humbly. With repentance. Poor in spirit. Looking for his mercy.
- And this is true for everyone. Long term followers. And those who have not. Of Jesus. And also those who have never come. To church. Or if it was your first time today. It's only as you and I.
- Turn away from the self-centered life. And humbly throw ourselves. On God's mercy in Jesus. That we receive that forgiveness. And experience that blessed grace.
- That peace with God. That the people coming to John. Were yearning for. That is the regular rhythm. Of the Christian life. And that's the reason why we confess our sins.
- [ 21 : 00 ] In each of our gatherings together. It's not the only time we do it this week. It's actually the pattern. We're meant to do day by day. Throughout the week to come.
- It is the way to real life. It is the way that we make a highway. For God. That we come to him. And receive our king. Gladly. Now I do want to say.
- That the glorious thing. About what John is saying. When he says. God is able from stones. To raise up children for Abraham. Is that God. In his power. Jesus. This powerful king.
- Can take even the person. Who feels farthest away from God. And make them his child. And he can take the person. Who feels most resentful. Is holding on to the worst sin.
- And he can release them. In his power. In his goodness. He takes hearts of stones. And makes them warm living hearts. That are alive to God.
- [ 21 : 58 ] So come to King Jesus. John says. With repentance. It is the straight path. It is the way. To true life with him. And that brings us to the last thing. The last new thing.
- That Jesus. Come. For us. Brings to us. And that is. That he gives a new fullness. He brings a new fullness to us.
- And an end. To spiritual emptiness. And this is the thing. That really struck a chord. For the people. Who were listening. Who were coming. And flocking to him.
- Because the people of Israel. Experienced. Spiritual emptiness. And you may be. Feeling this now too. They longed to hear God speak. They longed for him.
- To act in power. In their lives. They longed for him. To come among them. They felt separated from him. And wanted to know the reality of God. And they especially felt that emptiness.
- [ 22 : 55 ] If they were very aware of the sin. I was talking to somebody. A couple weeks ago. About a really difficult decision. That they realized was wrong. And sinful. Done years ago.
- And what we talked about was. Yes. You can name that as a sin. But never do that. Apart from the gospel of Jesus Christ. This king. Who comes with forgiveness.
- Because he died on a cross. It's the only way. That you can really look at your sin. Because it can only be. If God gives you. Something. That you cannot do for yourself.
- That you can face. That sin. There's a spiritual emptiness. Otherwise. And that's why John speaks directly to them. In verse 11. He says. I baptize you with water for repentance.
- But he who is coming after me. Is mightier than I am. Whose sandals I'm not worthy to carry. He's going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit. And with fire. And what John is saying there.
- [ 23 : 52 ] Is that. I'm immersing you with water. As a sign. But Jesus is greater. He is going to immerse you with the Holy Spirit. In other words. He will fill you.

And surround you. With a very presence of God. It's like you're a temple. Where God resides. And lives. And that fulfills one of the great prophecies.

Of the Old Testament. That one day. God is going to pour on individual people. His Holy Spirit. On all people who love and fear him. And that is how Jesus can promise.

At the end of the gospel. I am with you always. Even to the end. Of the earth. There is a bit of discomfort. There is hard things.

About God filling you too. And John is honest about this. Part of what fire does. To define you. And to take sin out of your life.

[ 24 : 48 ] But even though that is uncomfortable. There is a healing work. Of getting rid of sin. That happens here. And in that work. Jesus is gathering people to himself.

He is making people whole. When I thought of this. I thought of many years ago. I had Achilles surgery. On my heel. And I was awake when it was done.

But my leg was frozen. They do these amazing things. With a shot in your spine. And at the end of the surgery. You go into the recovery room.

And you start to feel cold. Like your leg is thawing out. And your cold is really right in the center of your body. And one of the wonderful things about being there.

Is that you get all these warm blankets put on you. There is an oven. With dozens of blankets. And nurses completely covered me. Immersed me in blankets.

[ 25 : 45 ] That had been warmed in the oven. And as the blankets cooled. You got a new batch put on you. And it is very very pleasant. But as I was immersed in the warmth.

And all that cold feeling. Was penetrated by that warmth. My leg was also thawing out. So you could feel some pain. Where the incision was.

But it wasn't a bad pain. Because I knew it was temporary. I knew that it was part of the healing. Of my leg. And I think there is something about this. That helps us understand.

That the work of the Holy Spirit. Is there is this goodness of the presence of God. Always with you. It is a warmth and a goodness. Which never leaves us.

But also. That Holy Spirit. Is doing this uncomfortable work. Of burning away the dross of sin itself. And our own self-centeredness. The idols that we cling to.

[ 26 : 41 ] Are being taken away by the Holy Spirit. And in that discomfort. God is working. A healing in us. A change in us. A new thing.

That only he can bring. Jesus is that baptizer. And that's why he can do it. And all who receive his kingly rule. Experience that refining fire.

It makes us more like the Lord himself. Helping us to know. What the life of God. Is all about. Now I want to end this passage. By saying that there is one more filling.

And perhaps the most important thing. It's what comes. It is why Jesus came. In verse 13. And that is. In verse 13.

John comes. Or Jesus comes. And wants to be baptized. It's the strangest thing. John says. No. You should baptize me. But Jesus' answer is very important.

[ 27 : 38 ] It's about that filling. They are the first words. Of Matthew. So we have to pay attention to it. Very critical. He says this. Let it be so now. This baptism.

For thus it is fitting for us. To fulfill. All. Righteousness. What Jesus is saying. Is that in that baptism. He is representing.

Every person. Who will come. To faith. In him. He is living the perfect life. In our place. Doing for you and me. What we cannot do.

For ourselves. So that on the cross. As Paul puts it the best. In 2 Corinthians 5. 21. On the cross. For our sake. God made Jesus to be sin.

Who knew no sin. So that in him. We might become. The righteousness. Of God. Do you see what this is saying? This is the good news. Jesus is giving to us.

[ 28 : 34 ] Filling us. With a righteousness. That is not our own. For the one reason. That we can know God. That we can become his righteousness.

Become part of his life. It is the great gift. That Jesus gives to us. It is why we know God. As our loving. Father. And we know that Jesus.

Has the authority to do this. Because. Jesus immediately came out of the water. It says. After his baptism. And the spirit of God. Descended on him like a dove. And came to rest on him.

And behold a voice. From heaven. Here is God speaking. It is what people longed for. This is my beloved son. With whom. I am well pleased. Here is God.

The Trinity. Father. Father. Son. And Holy Spirit. Together. Bringing about this mission. To bring us. Into the life of God. Forever. That is the power. Of Jesus righteousness.

[ 29 : 30 ] For you. It is so great. That it absolutely fills you. And the Bible says. You are in Christ. That's how much it fills you.

It makes you to be in Christ. And so God the Father. Looks on you. In all the messiness of your life. In all this journey of repentance. And he says to you.

This is my beloved daughter. With whom I am well pleased. This is my beloved son. You. Are my beloved son. In whom I am well pleased. That is the new beginning.

That Jesus the King. Came to give us. So may we serve him as our king. Love him as our ruler. Live that life of repentance.

Because he fills us. With all that is good. And he changes us. Forever. To God be all the glory. Praise and honor.

[ 30 : 27 ] For this gift. In his name we thank him. Amen.