

JOHN THE BAPTIST PREPARES THE WAY

Matthew 3:1-17

Key Verse: 3:2

"...and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'"

Today's passage is a story about John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus the Messiah. He prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah, [Jesus Christ](#). We learn from him what our message to people should be as the servants of Jesus Christ. In verses 13-17, Jesus receives baptism from John. It was not necessary for Jesus to do so, for he is the Son of God. But he received baptism from John. We want to know why it was necessary for him to do so.

I. John prepares the way (1-12)

First, John the Baptist (1-3). As we know well, John was the only son of very old Zechariah and Elizabeth. Verse 1 introduces him as "the Baptist." Originally, his holy mission was to be the forerunner of Jesus. But he prepared the way for the Lord through the message of baptism and repentance. Because of his message he became very famous among people as "the Baptist." So all four Gospels call him, "John the Baptist," instead of calling him, "the forerunner of Jesus." At the time when John came, the people of Israel were oppressed under Roman rule. Moreover, they had not received the word of God through the prophets for 400 long years, for it was a transitional period between the Old Testament and the New Testament. People were weary and tired without the life-giving word of God. They were longing for the voice of God. In this time of desperation, God sent John as [the voice of God](#).

God sent John with a great purpose as the forerunner of Jesus Christ. Look at verse 3. "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."'" This is a quotation from Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1, which prophesied what God would say when he would bring his people from captivity in Babylon. But this prophecy mainly pertains to John the Baptist, who would be the forerunner of the Messiah. John was conscious of his holy mission. John 1:23b says, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" He did not say, "I'm the running mate of Jesus the King." But he said, "I'm the voice of Jesus, to prepare the way of the Lord." In carrying out his mission, he had no hint of selfish ambition or concern for his future security. John was very popular. But he was very humble and he was a man of God.

The early American forefathers were sure that they were a new covenant people of God. They upheld God's holy mission and lived up to the teachings of [the Bible](#). They endeavored to proclaim the gospel of Jesus wherever they went. In short, the early Americans lived a pure life in the sight of God. Then God founded this nation on the word of God until they confessed, "In God We Trust." God also blessed this nation so abundantly, enough to feed all peoples of all nations, both materially and spiritually.

Second, John's message (2). Look at verse 2. "...and saying, 'Repent,

for the kingdom of heaven is near.'" John delivered the message of baptism and repentance in order to prepare the way for the Lord as his forerunner.

In the past, the entourage of a king was preceded by forerunners who shouted, "Kneel down and bow your heads! The king is coming!" John was the forerunner of the spiritual King, Jesus. But John was different. Instead of saying, "Kneel down and bow your head," he said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." John's message was very short and clear. It had two main points: First is "Repent." Why is repentance so important to receive Jesus? Repentance is the only way to come to God and to his house. The meaning of repentance is to come back to God. When we come back to God, it is the sign that we repented. When we don't come back to God, it is the sign that we are unrepentant. For example, Cain did not repent his sin of killing his younger brother. He talked back to God, saying, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Ge 4:9b) Satan made him so rebellious that he did not repent. When Cain did not repent, he did not recognize God as God. When he did not repent, he became his own man. Outwardly he lived as free as a bird in the sky, but his inner man was full of guilt and a sense of punishment, and he was a restless wanderer.

How can we repent? The prodigal son in the parable of the lost son is a good example of repentance. On the day he became 18, he demanded that his father give him his share of the inheritance. He left his home and enjoyed his unlimited sinful human freedom, squandering his money and enjoying godless behavior. After he had spent all he had, he had nowhere to go at all. Suddenly he remembered his father's house. He turned his heart to his father and went back home. It was an act of faith. But to his surprise, instead of punishing him, his father welcomed him, hugged and kissed him, and prepared a big party for his homecoming, as well as for his honor.

Repentance has a deeper meaning. Repentance is making a choice between God and Satan. A Chinese philosopher claims "the middle path" as the principle of man's life. The principle of democracy is "compromise" for mutual benefit. But in the spiritual world, there is no middle way or compromise with Satan. Romans 6:15-23 indoctrinates us that there are only two ways: First is to become a servant of God; second is to become a servant of Satan. Each person has to choose one or the other. Each person has to examine whether he is a servant of God or a servant of Satan.

Repentance is good. But we cannot repent with our own strength. Sin makes us too sensitive to do anything. People's sinful nature directs them to be defensive of their sins or become self-righteous to justify their sins, until they become mental patients. When we want to repent, we must ask God's mercy that he may give us the spirit of repentance.

"The kingdom of heaven" is the second point of his message (2). Here, "the kingdom of heaven" refers to Jesus Christ, who came to this world to save us from our sins and bring us back to his kingdom. Matthew's Gospel mainly emphasizes the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is our eternal home when we complete our earthly pilgrimage. We can also see the kingdom of God while on earth. One young man studied hard and became a high-ranking official. His hope, though, was not to become

a high-ranking official, but to marry. He thought that if he married, he would be happy. So he married a woman. But he was not happy. So he beat his wife, complaining about many things. His new family's situation became very critical. But the young man began to study the Bible in UBF and accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior. Then God opened his spiritual eyes to understand spiritual realities. Since then, he always bragged about his wife, saying, "You know, my wife is number one in the world."

Our life is a pilgrimage. The physical pilgrimage is our daily routine. The spiritual pilgrimage is to press forward to the kingdom of God. We must have hope. The evangelist Billy Graham said, "Man can survive without sex, but man cannot survive without hope." Earthly hope is hard to fulfill; at the same time, among the things of the world there is nothing that does not perish, spoil or fade away. Therefore, Jesus and his house should be our living hope (1 Pe 1:3,4). This is the reason John preached the kingdom of God.

Third, John's lifestyle (4). Look at verse 4. "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." John lived in the desert, where no one bothered his life of prayer. He lived a simple life. He ate poor food, such as locusts and honey. He wore only one leather garment. John used it during the daytime to block the scorching heat of the sun, and at nighttime as a blanket. When we think of him from a worldly point of view, he looks like Oscar the Grouch, who represents a smelly guy in the community of Sesame Street. But John the Baptist's lifestyle depicts the poor and suffering people of Israel. Most importantly, his lifestyle represents the pure life in God. When John lived a pure life, God gave him the spirit of Elijah (Lk 1:17), and the shepherd heart of Moses. When he lived a pure life, God gave him spiritual power to preach the message of repentance to all who came to him. When he lived a pure life, God could use him as the most important person in the work and history of God. His pure life was his essential quality in being the forerunner of the Messiah. Many people live an impure life because of peer pressure or because of their own sinful desires. May God help us to have a holy desire to live a pure life like John the Baptist.

Fourth, people's response to John's message (5-6). Look at verse 5. "People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan." These days the message of repentance is very unpopular. In a small village church in Oklahoma the elders counseled a wayward woman to repent of her immoral life. She did not repent; instead, she sued the church for more than a million dollars, charging them with invasion of privacy. Incredibly, the court ruled in her favor, awarding her \$400,000. But the people of Jesus' time were eager to repent. They really wanted to come to God. They really wanted to get out of Satan's rule. They really wanted to change their life direction in God. They really wanted to worship the holy God. They really wanted to experience happiness in being his children. They really wanted to see the kingdom of God. It was because they knew that they could find the solution to all their problems in God. In view of church history many kinds of movements of repentance always ameliorated the world.

After repentance, they were baptized by John in the Jordan River

(6). They experienced that their burden of sin was gone. They experienced unutterable joy overflowing in their hearts. After repentance, they were baptized. Baptism was their declaration that they were God's people, cleansed and glorified, and they were the members of the kingdom of God.

Fifth, John rebukes religious leaders (7-10). John saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing. They were in authority both in politics and religion. On seeing them, John rebuked them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (7b,8). John called them a "brood of vipers" because they were supposed to be servants of God and shepherds for his suffering people. But they were like devious politicians. Also, they were selfish. Their influence on his people was very harmful. John also rebuked them to repent of their fruitless lives. If they were religious leaders they should have many sheep. But they did not have even one one-to-one Bible study sheep. They thought they were saved because they were descendants of Abraham. They were very self-righteous like modern old Christians. They did not repent. They did not bear fruit (8).

John warns them they were under God's wrath and imminent judgment. God loves and saves. And at the same time God judges and condemns. But they did not believe God is the Judge. Each time they sinned, they wished they would be all right. But they were not all right. They were under God's wrath and eternal condemnation. Look at verse 10. "The ax 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."

Sixth, John's faith in Jesus (11,12). John became very popular among people. But he was not proud at all. He witnessed to Jesus: First, Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire (11). John says that his baptism is water baptism, which was nothing but an expression of repentance toward God and a declaration to the world of being the children of God. But Jesus baptizes men with the Holy Spirit and fire, through which Jesus changes men inwardly. Jesus cleanses men from their sinsickness through the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire. Second, Jesus is the Judge of all men (12). Those who do not believe in him will come under eternal condemnation. John believed that Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire and he is the Judge of all men.

II. Jesus receives baptism from John (13-17)

Look at verse 13. "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John." John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (14) John hesitated to baptize him, for he knew Jesus was God who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire.

What did Jesus say in response to John? Look at verse 15. "Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.' Then John consented." This verse indicates that Jesus received this baptism "to fulfill all righteousness." Righteousness is Jesus through whom God wanted to save men from their sins (Ro 1:17). In order to fulfill God's will, Jesus honored God's way of doing his work and history. In order to take over John's work to

himself, Jesus humbled himself and received baptism from John. Here we learn that we cannot participate in God's work without humbleness.

What happened when he received John's baptism? Look at verse 16. "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him." What a glorious scene it was! After being anointed by the Holy Spirit, Jesus began his earthly messianic ministry. Gospel work is a battle with evil spirits. May God give us the Holy Spirit. How? Luke 11:13 says, "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" Let's ask God for the coming of the Holy Spirit upon each of us.

What happened when Jesus received baptism from John the Baptist? Look at verse 17. "And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'" God was pleased to see that his work of salvation was proceeding from John to Jesus as was prophesied. So God made a declaration to the world that Jesus is the Savior of the world who came to fulfill God's salvation plan. This event was virtually the inauguration of the Messiah King.

In this passage we learn that God's work proceeded in accordance with the prophecies. First John the Baptist came and next Jesus came to take over his work. We also learn that our message should be the message of repentance and the kingdom of heaven. We also learn that we must be as humble as Jesus in doing God's work.