

Explore the Bible Adult Leader Commentary

Session 1

The Way Prepared

Matthew 3:1-12

Context: Matthew 3:1-12

Memory Verse: Matthew 3:3

Main Idea: Jesus came to earth as the promised King who provides salvation for those who trust Him.

FIRST THOUGHTS

Preparing the ground for a backyard garden can be an intimidating task. Sometimes the soil is hard and packed. Weeds are prolific. This first stage of preparing the garden is the most challenging, often requiring tillers and shovels and other garden tools. Once this heavy work is done, the following stages of preparation are less daunting. The removal of weeds calls for special attention. Removing the roots of weeds is imperative, or they will quickly produce more weeds and briars. Then comes the task of preparing soil for the final stage of planting the seed or setting out the plants that will ultimately produce the flowers. The reward comes with the transformation of the ground from a hard, packed earth to a cultivated bed that produces the result of the gardener's labors.

(In PSG, p. 13) What kind of preparation would be required to establish a garden at your residence? What obstacles would need to be overcome? Do you think it would be worth the effort? Explain.

The world into which God was about to send His Son was a moral and spiritual bramble patch. Prophets throughout the generations had warned of the results the people would face because of their refusal to repent. After the prophet Malachi, four hundred years passed without a prophetic voice in Israel. Instead of being alarmed that God was not speaking to them, the people grew more and more sinful. Now it was time, on God's calendar, for the coming of His Son to provide a way of escape for those who would receive Him as Savior. To prepare for this event, God sent John to warn the people of judgment to come. He would be the herald, the announcer, of the coming Messiah. He would prepare the way for the coming of God's Son.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

Matthew 3:1-12

A gap of over 400 years existed between the last of the Old Testament prophets (Malachi) and the birth of Jesus (around 4 B.C.). A summary of the events related to Jews during those four centuries offers valuable background to Matthew. After their return from exile in Babylon, the Jews attempted to re-establish their former lives in their homeland. The rise of Alexander the Great saw Greek culture extend into Jewish territory. The Jews became pawns in the power struggles of Alexander's successors. Finally the Jews gained a hard-fought independence for about 100 years. Rome eventually made inroads into Palestine and gained control. By the time of Jesus' birth, the Romans held a tight reign on Jewish territory.

Jewish religious leaders accepted an uneasy peace with Roman authorities. They needed each other to retain control of the larger populace. The religious hierarchy protected their position by instituting rigid, legalistic religious practices that alienated them from the average person. All this led to a sense of hopelessness among the people.

Against that historical context Matthew presented the hope of a new kind of King who reigned in a new kind of Kingdom. The lives of the people were dominated by political oppression and demanding religious leaders. Jesus offered them something, however, that the human authorities could not control. He provided hope based on a right relationship with God.

About 30 years passed from the time of Jesus' birth and early years (Matt. 1-2) to the start of His ministry. Matthew highlighted the ministry and message of John the Baptist as preparatory to Jesus' public ministry. John's confrontational preaching of repentance broke the silence of the years when the people heard no word from God.

The connection between Jesus and John the Baptist preceded their births. Their mothers, Mary and Elizabeth, were relatives. Elizabeth gave birth to John six months before Mary birthed Jesus (Luke 1:26,36). Jesus possibly had His eye on John for a long time. The positive reception John received alerted Jesus to the imminence of His own public ministry.

God ordered the perfect timing of the ministries of John and Jesus. John whetted the appetite of the people for a fresh message from God. He never lost sight of his purpose to prepare the people for the greater One. At just the right time Jesus walked onto the scene to claim His Kingship.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

PREPARING THE WAY (Matt. 3:1-6)

¹ In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Wilderness of Judea ² and saying, “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!” ³ For he is the one spoken of through the prophet Isaiah, who said: A voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way for the Lord; make His paths straight! ⁴ John himself had a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then people from Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the vicinity of the Jordan were flocking to him, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins.

Verses 1-6 highlight a prominent theme in Matthew: Jesus’ life and teaching fulfilled the Old Testament Law and Prophets. The Jews anticipated the return of one of the prophets as a sign of the coming of the Messiah. Some looked for a prophet like Moses (see Deut. 18:18). More commonly, Jews expected God to send “Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome Day of the Lord comes” (Mal. 4:5). Consistent with this belief, God sent John the Baptist as a forerunner prophet to prepare the way for Jesus.

VERSE 1

A span of almost 30 years occurred between the events of chapters two and three. *John the Baptist* burst on the scene *preaching*. The term for *preaching* designated a herald or spokesperson with a message from the king or someone of high position. The herald carried the full authority of the king. John preached in *the Wilderness of Judea*. This region sloped down from the Judean hills south of Jerusalem toward the Dead Sea. Desert settings held significance in the history of God’s people. The great prophets Moses and Elijah spent time there. King David also experienced the desert life. It was a place where a person could meet with God without distractions.

VERSE 2

John the Baptist’s straightforward message urged people to *repent*. This Old Testament theme recalled the sinful nature of humans and the need to turn to God. Repentance means to turn and go in a different direction. But true repentance also requires a change of behavior.

John pressed for this drastic change of attitude and actions because *the kingdom of heaven has come near*. A kingdom is where a king rules. The Jews anticipated a Messianic kingdom that was geographically and politically based. They expected to see the kingdom. In His sovereignty, however, God establishes His reign in human hearts. The rule of God had arrived already. Thus, John’s preaching stressed the need for urgency.

More than likely the terms *kingdom of heaven* and *kingdom of God* mean the same thing. Why did Matthew prefer to use *kingdom of heaven*? Dedicated Jews thought the verbalization of God’s name was sacrilegious, so they found words to substitute for the name of God. *Heaven* was one of those words.

VERSE 3

John quoted Isaiah 40:3 to explain his own prophetic, preparatory task. This description highlights the prophetic similarities between John and Elijah. John, like Elijah, preached in *the wilderness*. Elijah spoke with the authority of God. John’s *voice* also trumpeted God’s message like a herald announcing the arrival of the king.

Isaiah’s original context for this prophecy possibly revolved around the homecoming of the Jews from Babylonian exile. God removed roadblocks that hindered a return to their homeland. Isaiah compared this triumphant return to the visit of a king. In ancient times the visit of a king required extensive arrangements, including road work. Pot holes and crooked turns on ancient roads made travel uncomfortable. Since the king deserved and expected the best, road workers went ahead to make roads passable. John saw himself as a “road worker” readying the path of the coming Messiah.

VERSE 4

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The stark clothing and diet of John further identified him with the dynamic wilderness prophets of the Old Testament, especially Elijah (2 Kings 1:8). John wore *a camel-hair garment* and *a leather belt*, materials readily available in the wilderness.

The *locusts* and *wild honey* indicate John ate typical desert fare. Some argue that the *locusts* were pods from a desert tree. The insect, however, also contained useful nutrition. John the Baptist ate and wore basic items found in the desert. What might be considered a hardship for most did not divert John. He kept a sharp focus on the task at hand.

VERSE 5

To whom did John the Baptist preach? The wilderness population was limited. Proximity to Jerusalem, the main city of the nation and seat of political and religious leadership, placed large numbers of people near John.

What drove John's popularity? Certainly his urgent, direct message gained him attention. But remember the era in which John preached. For the first time in 400 years Israel experienced a real prophet. Religion had become stale and stilted. John's message thrust long-lost hope in front of these people. They craved a genuine word from God, and John delivered.

VERSE 6

The people responded to John's preaching by allowing him to baptize them *in the Jordan River*, hence the name John the Baptizer. John chose this act of water baptism for a reason. Other ancient cultures used it to serve different purposes. The Jews practiced baptism in some contexts. When Gentiles converted to Judaism, they submitted to baptism as a way to wash away their Gentile uncleanness. Some Jews also practiced baptism as a purification rite.

John took this act known to his hearers and gave it new meaning. His baptism symbolized a decision to repent. It evidenced a heart change. For John, it stood for the cleansing from sin associated with repentance. It served as a public commitment to a changed life that set the person on a new path with God. The word *baptism* refers to complete immersion in water.

A crucial act accompanied baptism: the people *confessed their sins*. They could not turn from sin until they first admitted to being sinners. Through confession, the people agreed they needed to repent and receive God's forgiveness.

Eventually, Jesus came to John to be baptized (Matt. 3:13). Jesus, of course, did not seek baptism to show repentance. He didn't need to repent. His baptism became for Him a public introduction to His ministry. He took the act of baptism and expanded its meaning further. It eventually became a picture of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. For Christians, baptism symbolizes an acceptance into the life of salvation offered by the forgiveness of sin.

Why is the call to repentance relevant today? What role does confession play in the salvation process?

PROCLAIMING THE TRUTH (Matt. 3:7-10)

⁷ *When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to the place of his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"* ⁸ *Therefore produce fruit consistent with repentance.* ⁹ *And don't presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones!* ¹⁰ *Even now the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees! Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*

VERSE 7

Among those flocking to hear John the Baptist were *Pharisees and Sadducees*. The Pharisees revered the law and sought to protect it. Their detailed interpretations of the law expanded it and led to legalistic tendencies. Few disputed that Pharisees were good people as far as right actions. The Sadducees held closely to the first five books of the Old Testament as their guide. Most of them hailed from the priestly class and served in the temple. Most leaders or rulers of Judaism held membership in one of these two groups. Disagreement over legal interpretations and power issues usually left these parties at odds with each other.

The visit of the religious elite to John's venue got his attention. More than likely they felt threatened by John's popularity. He recognized their hypocrisy and branded them a *brood of vipers*. John saw in them what they refused to see in themselves—sinners in need of salvation. He declined any sympathy for their self-promoting agenda.

John questioned why they had come out of their dens like snakes. Were they there "just in case" John might be right? Or did his popularity threaten them so much that they feigned interest as a means to get close enough to gather damaging evidence against him? He knew them to be unrepentant. John warned that they would not be able to avoid the *wrath* of God's judgment.

VERSES 8-10

What basis did John have to question the motives of the religious leaders? He saw no evidence that they lived repentant lives. John identified the real test of faith as *fruit consistent with repentance*. Good works follow salvation as confirmation of a changed life.

John explained further the reason for this word of judgment. The religious leaders committed the sin of presumption. They presumed that as descendants of *Abraham* their heritage as God's chosen people guaranteed a right relationship with God. They considered themselves special in God's eyes and above common sinners because of their Jewish ancestry. John challenged that presumption as false.

The religious leaders forgot that God sets the standard for who His people are. God is able to *raise up children for Abraham from these stones*. This exaggeration illustrated the fact that God can take a rock and make it His child if He chooses. Heritage does not ensure a right relationship with God.

John continued the judgment language. In an orchard, unproductive trees got cut to make room for others. The farmer added the useless tree to the pile to burn. *Fire* often symbolized judgment.

What are some things people might depend on for salvation instead of the grace of God? How can you use this passage to explain the error of those beliefs?

POINTING TO THE KING (Matt. 3:11-12)

¹¹ I baptize you with water for repentance, but the One who is coming after me is more powerful than I. I am not worthy to remove His sandals. He Himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing shovel is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn. But the chaff He will burn up with fire that never goes out."

VERSE 11

John purposed to stir people to repent. His baptism with *water for repentance* symbolized the heart change God makes in those who turn to Him.

The phrase *the One who is coming* resonated with the Jews. They would have understood it as a reference to the coming Messiah. No doubt the skeptical religious leaders picked up on the terminology.

John knew his role. He refused to be caught up in the excitement that accompanied the great wilderness revival. He contrasted Jesus' greatness with his lowly status when he said: *I am not worthy to remove His sandals*. Such duty fell to slaves. John, although great in the eyes of many, considered himself no more than Jesus' lowly slave.

The distinctive power of Jesus lay not in water baptism like John's but in baptism with the *Holy Spirit and fire*. Although Jesus submitted to water baptism and encouraged it for others, He offered an immersion in a new kind of life. To the Jews, the Spirit (meaning "wind" or "breath") represented the indwelling of God's living presence in their lives. This linkage of Jesus and the Holy Spirit equated Jesus with Messiah.

John also related Jesus' baptism to *fire*. Like wind, fire exerts the power to consume. This probably compared the purifying effect of fire with the cleansing power of Jesus' work of salvation. Fire represented judgment in verse 10. In this verse, however, fire depicted the hope of changed lives offered by Jesus.

VERSE 12

John used the agricultural illustration of a granary to explain Jesus' role further. After crushing newly harvested grain, the farmer took a *winnowing shovel* or scoop and pitched the grain in the air. The lighter husks floated off in the wind. The good kernels fell to the floor. The farmer worked to *clear His threshing floor*. He diligently saved every piece of grain. A good farmer missed nothing useful. He got every bit of valuable *wheat into the barn*. The chaff or husks might be burned as fuel. They served no other useful purpose. The *fire that never goes out* indicates a blistering blaze that consumes everything in it.

These images of storing the good grain and total destruction of the waste depict two crucial roles of the Messiah. One, He came to save people from sin. He loses none who call on Him for salvation. Two, the Messiah will judge those who reject Him. Jesus became a great separator who makes no mistakes with the souls entrusted to Him. John never claimed that kind of authority. Instead, he pointed people to One with that kind of discernment and power.

In what ways do you think contemporary Christians are to be like John the Baptist? What are some characteristics you see in John that might be incorporated into your life to enable you to fulfill God's purpose for you?

KEY DOCTRINE

Evangelism and Missions

The Lord Jesus Christ has commanded the preaching of the gospel to all nations.

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BIBLE SKILL

Use a Bible atlas and Bible dictionary (print or online version) to locate and learn about places mentioned in Scripture.

Locate the Judean wilderness in a Bible atlas. (Tip: Check the atlas index or search on the internet for Judean wilderness.) Note places significant to John's ministry, such as the Jordan River and Jerusalem. Use a Bible dictionary to learn more about the Judean wilderness. What other crucial events in the Bible took place in this wilderness? How does the wilderness serve as an appropriate backdrop for the announcement of the coming Messiah?

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "The Message and Purpose of Matthew's Gospel" and "Camel Hair Garments" in the Winter 2015-16 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator.