

Bible Study July 2, 2025

MATTHEW 3 Voice in the Wilderness (ESV)

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

¹ In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ² “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

- We see that later when John is arrested Jesus preached the same message.

Matthew 4:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Almost 30 years had passed since the events of Matthew 2. Here John the Baptist burst onto the scene. His theme was Repent of your sins. The people needed to repent—make a 180-degree turn—from the kind of self-centeredness that dominates the human condition. When we repent, we open the door to God’s leading and healing that our rebellion once blocked. God, in his mercy, has turned toward us. Now we can turn to him by admitting our sin, as John urged. Then God will receive us into his Kingdom. Remember that only God can get rid of your sin. But he doesn’t expect you to clean up your life before you come to him. A new life follows repentance.

The Kingdom of Heaven began when God himself entered human history as a man. His ministry brought new light and power into the world that would be affirmed at his resurrection and at Pentecost. Today, Jesus Christ reigns in the hearts of believers, so his Kingdom is near if you invite him in as Lord of your life. But the Kingdom of Heaven will not be fully realized on earth until all evil in the world is judged and removed. Jesus came to earth first as a suffering servant; he will come again as king and judge to rule victoriously over all the earth.

***³ 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.’”***

The prophecy quoted is from Isaiah 40:3. Isaiah was one of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament and one of the most quoted in the New. Like Isaiah, John was a prophet who urged the people to confess their sins and live for God. Both prophets taught that the message of repentance brings good news to those who listen and seek the healing forgiveness of God’s love but terrible news to those who refuse to listen and thus cut off their only hope.

John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus by preparing others to welcome him. People who do not know Jesus need to be prepared to meet him. We can help prepare them by explaining to them their need for forgiveness, demonstrating Jesus’ teachings by loving and helping them, and telling them how Christ can give their lives meaning. We can “clear the road for him” by correcting misconceptions that might be hindering people from approaching him. Someone you know may be open to a relationship with Jesus. How can you signal to them that you are ready and willing to help?

Isaiah 40:3-5 (ESV)

³ A voice cries:

*"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

⁴ *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.*

⁵ *And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."*

⁴ Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

This reminds me of **2 Kings 1:8 (ESV)** which tells us that Elijah dressed like this too. ⁸ *They answered him, "He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist." And he said, "It is Elijah the Tishbite."*

John was markedly different from other religious leaders of his day. While many were greedy, selfish, and preoccupied with winning the praise of the people, John was concerned only with the praise of God. Having separated himself from the evil and hypocrisy associated with the Temple and the religious power in Jerusalem, John lived differently to show that his message was new. John not only preached God's law but, like Jesus, also lived it. Do you practice what you preach? Could people discover what you believe by observing the way you live?

***⁵ Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him,
⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.***

Why did John attract so many people? He was the first true prophet in 400 years. He publicly rebuked both Herod and the religious leaders with daring and courageous words that fascinated the common people. But John also had a strong message for his audience: They, too, were sinners and needed to turn from their sins. They recognized that his words were powerful and true. The people were expecting a prophet like Elijah (Malachi 4:5; Luke 1:17), and John seemed to be the one!

Many people came to hear this preacher who wore odd clothes and ate unusual food. In many ways he acted like Elijah, the great prophet who defeated the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:1-46; 2 Kings 1:8).

When you wash dirt off your hands, you see immediate results. But repentance brings cleansing inside, which isn't always easy to see. So John used a symbolic action that people could see: baptism. The Jews used baptism to initiate converts and as a purification rite, so John's audience was familiar with the practice. Here, baptism was used as a sign of repentance and forgiveness.

The word repent means “to turn,” implying a change in behavior. Repentance is turning from sin toward God. Have you turned from the sin in your life? Have you been baptized? Can others see the difference Jesus makes in you? A changed life with new and different behavior makes your repentance real and visible.

⁷ But 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?”

The Jewish religious leaders were divided into several groups. Two of the most prominent groups were the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisees separated themselves from anything non-Jewish and carefully followed both the Old Testament laws and the oral traditions handed down through the centuries. The Sadducees adhered only to the law of Moses, which is found in the first five books of the Old Testament, Genesis through Deuteronomy. They were descended mainly from priestly nobility, while the Pharisees came from all classes of people. The two groups disliked each other greatly, but both opposed Jesus. John the Baptist criticized the Pharisees for being legalistic and hypocritical, following the letter of the law while ignoring its true intent. He criticized the Sadducees for using religion to advance their political position.

⁸ Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

Repentance is not just heard it is seen in your actions.

Luke 3:10-14 (ESV)

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” ¹¹ And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” ¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” ¹³ And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”

John the Baptist called people to more than words or rituals; he told them to change their behavior. “Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins” means that God looks beyond our words and religious activities to see if our conduct backs up what we say, and he judges our words by the actions that accompany them. All the prophets called for renewed devotion to God and care for those in need. How do your actions match up with your words?

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.

Just as a fruit tree is expected to bear fruit, God’s people should produce a crop of good deeds. God has no use for people who call themselves Christians but who live otherwise. We can’t say we’re safe just because we grew up in Christian homes or attend church. Like many people in John’s day who were God’s people in name only, we don’t produce anything of eternal value if we are Christians in name only. Others may evaluate our faith by the way we treat them, so treat them well.

God’s message hasn’t changed since the Old Testament: People will be held accountable for their unproductive lives. God doesn’t ask us just to avoid sin but to be proactive in following him. John

compared people who claim they believe God but don't live for God to unproductive trees that will be cut down. To be fruitful for God, we must obey his commands, resist temptation, actively serve and help others, and share our faith. How does your life bear fruit for God?

¹¹ “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. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² 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 baptized people as a sign that they had asked God to forgive their sins and had decided to live as he wanted them to live. Baptism was an outward sign of commitment. To be effective, it had to be accompanied by an inward change of attitude leading to a changed life—the work of the Holy Spirit. John said that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. This looked ahead to Pentecost (Acts 2), when the Holy Spirit would be sent by Jesus in the form of tongues of fire, empowering his followers to preach the Good News. John's statement also symbolizes the purifying and cleansing work of the Holy Spirit in bringing God's judgment on those who refuse to turn from their sins (Zechariah 13:9). Everyone will one day be baptized—either now by God's Holy Spirit or later by the fire of his judgment.

A winnowing fork is a pitchfork-like tool used to toss wheat that has already been threshed into the air to separate grain from chaff. The grain is the part of the plant that is useful; chaff is the worthless outer shell or husk and the other useless parts of the plant. Because it is useless, chaff is burned; grain, however, is gathered. Winnowing is often used as a picture of God's judgment. Unrepentant people will be judged and discarded because they are worthless in doing God's work; those who repent and believe will be saved and used by God.

The Baptism of Jesus

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented.

John had been explaining that Jesus' baptism would be much greater than his, when suddenly Jesus came to him and asked to be baptized! These are Jesus' first spoken words recorded by Matthew. John felt unqualified. He wanted Jesus to baptize him. Why did Jesus ask to be baptized? It was not for repentance for sin, because Jesus never sinned. “We must carry out all that God requires” refers to accomplishing God's mission that John had played a role in initiating. Jesus saw his baptism as validating and advancing God's work. Jesus was baptized because (1) he was showing support for what John was doing; (2) he was inaugurating his public ministry; (3) he was giving us an example to follow; (4) he was identifying with the penitent people of God rather than with the critical Pharisees who were only watching. Jesus, the perfect man, didn't need baptism for sin, but he accepted baptism in obedient service to the Father, and God showed his approval.

Put yourself in John's shoes. Your work is going well, people are taking notice, everything is growing. But you know that the purpose of your work is to prepare the people for Jesus (John 1:35-37). Then Jesus arrives, and his coming tests your integrity. Will you be able to turn your followers over to him? John passed the test by publicly baptizing Jesus. Soon he would say, “He

must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less" (John 3:30). Can we, like John, put our egos and profitable work aside in order to point others to Jesus?

¹⁶ And 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 and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Isaiah 42:1 (ESV)

⁴² Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

In this passage, all three persons of the Trinity are present and active. God the Father speaks; God the Son is baptized; God the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus. The complete formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity and that terminology developed later in church history, but the basis for it is present in the Bible and the reality of it has existed forever. The doctrine of the Trinity states that God exists in three persons and yet is one in essence. The Trinity represents a loving relationship existing from eternity between the three persons of God. Here God the Father affirms his love for the Son with a voice from heaven. This is one of God's incomprehensible mysteries. Other Bible references that speak of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are Matthew 28:19; John 15:26; 1 Corinthians 12:4-13; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Ephesians 2:18; 1 Thessalonians 1:2-5; and 1 Peter 1:2.