

The Forerunner of King Jesus

Matt. 3:1-12

Intro. During the past 5 Sundays when we've been together we've considered the first two chapters of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew's purpose is clear. He presents Jesus as the Messiah and rightful king of Israel and the world. Each section in **chaps.1-4** was written to demonstrate His credentials. But in our passage this AM, center stage belongs to John the Baptist. All four Gospel writers name John as the one chosen by God to prepare the way for Jesus.

As **chap. 3** opens, years have passed and Jesus is now about 30 years of age. Except for the story reported in **Lk. 2** when his family lost track of Him at the Feast of Passover in Jerusalem, the Scriptures are silent concerning the years between **Matt. 2:23** and **3:1**. Almost every parent has experienced the trauma of "misplacing" a child...but Jesus wasn't lost. At 12 years of age, He already knew who He was and what His Father has sent Him to do. That chapter in Luke's Gospel ends this way...**And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men. (Lk. 2:52)** Aside from Apocryphal fables that are pure fantasy...this is all the Bible says about Jesus from his family's return to Nazareth until the emergence of John the Baptist.

In the ancient world, new kings were introduced by a forerunner...a herald... a king-maker. In the OT, Samuel introduced and anointed King Saul and then David. Two men preside when a president is sworn into office in the US. One is the former president...the man leaving office...the other is the Chief Justice. Standing on either side of the newly elected president, they testify the man standing between them is the legitimate successor. This was the role of John the Baptist. As the last prophet of the OT era, he introduced Jesus to Israel. He testified that Jesus is the King chosen and anointed by God. He appears in this role in **Jn.1:29 - The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!** John's ministry was to point people to Jesus and fade to black in the process. In utter humility and self-awareness he explained his role in **Jn.3:30 - He must become greater; I must become less.** It was precisely because of John's humility and faithfulness that Jesus said, **I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. (Matt. 11:11)**

But John was more than a man appointed to introduce Jesus. As a cousin and forerunner to the King, John was commissioned to prepare the way by calling the nation to repentance. Like a Dept. of Transportation Commissioner, John's role was to repair the roadway for the coming of Heaven's King. As we'll see in the text, his coming was anticipated by the prophets. If these prophecies had been known and believed, the Jews would have recognized John and embraced Jesus. Like Simeon and Anna, they would have connected the dots and praised God for the wonderful things He was doing in their day. So let's turn to **Matt. 3**. We'll begin by reading **vs.1-3**.

1. John's message to the average Judean – vs. 1-3 - In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." 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.'"

Who was this John the Baptist? And by the way...was he Northern Baptist / Southern Baptist, Conservative Baptist / or did he belong to the GARB? The answer is, "none of the above." John was fiercely independent. He was a leader, not a joiner...a renegade according to the best meaning of the word. A better name for him is John the Baptizer because that's what he did...he baptized. Because the Gospel was delivered to the Jews first, John came to the region which was the center of Israel's national and religious life. But he didn't come into the city of Jerusalem!

His ministry was outside the city and outside the Temple. He came preaching in the **Desert of Judea**...that desolate region between Israel and Jordan where the Jordan River flows. Here's a photo of this area and the barbed fence that today separates Israel from Jordan. John drew people away from the religious establishment... away from the corruption, superficiality, self-righteousness and dead ritualism that was Judaism at this time. He brought them to a wilderness place where they were more inclined to listen, to think, and to ponder. Missing in this quiet place was the distractions and misleading voices they were so accustomed to. The principle illustrated here is one reason we support Christian camping. A weekend away at a place like Camp Barakel can accomplish more than a dozen Sunday sermons! God often speaks to our hearts when we are outside our comfort zones. The setting for John's ministry reminds us of Israel's 40 years in the Wilderness. God didn't settle His people in a city because He knew His voice could be heard more clearly in the desert. What might God say to us, if we allowed ourselves to be quiet before Him? What might He say if we "unplugged" from radio / TV / cel phones / email / Facebook / Twitter...and all else that prevents us from hearing His still small voice? We might be surprised! Commotion is a great enemy of our souls!

As we consider John's message, one thing is certain...he never attended a church growth seminar or read a book on "How to conduct a seeker sensitive church service." He wasn't trained in "How to send everybody home feeling good." Like the prophets before him, John was a straight shooter. He didn't sugar coat or water down God's message. He wasn't afraid to offend people in the interest of speaking the truth. So this AM we need to fasten our seat belts and resist the impulse to bolt for the door. John's message was convicting. And His message is as much for us today as it was for the Judeans. He thundered ... **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."** This same message was preached by Jesus and His apostles after Him. It's a message that rebukes easy Christianity in the Church and the message the whole unsaved world needs to hear. If you think the call to repentance is old fashioned and outdated...read the book of Revelation. Revelation leaps over 2,000 years of church history. It exposes conditions at the end before Christ returns. The admonition made to the Church and the world is the same...**repent**. To **repent** means to turn from sin and self-will to God. To repent is to forsake evil and pursue righteousness. Why did people need to repent?...because **the Kingdom of Heaven was near**. God's reign or rule over the world was not far off. It was near...it was close at hand because Heaven's King had come.

But notice the specific prophecy fulfilled by John the Baptizer. **vs. 3** says, **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 direct quote from Isa. 40:3. To understand the context of this prophecy, we need to read the first several verses of Isa. 40. Pastor Jerry read them a moment ago but listen again to Isa. 40:1-3 - Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.**

Isaiah ministered during a time of bitter turmoil in the southern kingdom. The northern kingdom had already been carried off into captivity. The big question was this...would Judah be next? The early chapters of Isaiah are mostly doom and gloom. Disaster and defeat were prophesied for the Jews because of their sin and rebellion against God. God's warnings went unheeded and the southern kingdom was eventually punished and taken into captivity to Babylon in 586 BC. But Isaiah's prophecy wasn't entirely doom and gloom. From **chap. 40** onwards, the Lord made many promises concerning the Messiah and His coming Kingdom. **Chap. 40** is the turning point from warfare and calamity to redemption and return. The calamities were coming because of their sin. But now in **chap. 40** the situation turns. The nation's sin is finally paid for and war ends. Matthew was given to see the arrival of Jesus as the dawn of this new day.

After 400 years from Malachi to John the Baptist...a time when no word from God was heard...the silence was broken and a voice was heard...**A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.** John's role was to prepare the nation for the Lord Jesus and the Good News concerning the Kingdom of Heaven. If the Jews had believed and embraced Jesus, wars would have ended. Peace and comfort would have come! Many OT prophecies would have come to pass. But listen to what Jesus said in **Lk. 19:42, 43 - "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace--but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side.**

John's emergence was a key event in God's Kingdom program. It was like D-day...the day when Allied Forces landed on the beach at Normandy and the tide of war against Germany began to turn. John had come to announce and prepare the way for the Prince of Peace. But God / His Kingdom / and His peace, will never come on man's terms or on man's timetable. Because God is holy and righteous and pure, sinners (and that's every one of us) must repent to embrace Him. We must turn from our sin and self-will to benefit from His grace and peace. We must come to God on His terms.

This message John preached was revolutionary but it wasn't new. If the Jews paid attention to their OT, they would have recognized God's requirement. The call to repent was on the lips of every prophet the Lord sent. In the oldest book of the OT Elihu asked this question...**Should God then reward you on your terms, when you refuse to repent? You must decide, not I; so tell me what you know.** - Job 34:33. Through Isaiah the Lord said, **Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him, and to our God, for He will freely pardon.** - Isa. 55:7 Like Isaiah, Ezekiel said, **"Therefore, O house of Israel, I will judge you, each one according to his ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. – Ezek. 18:30.** Israel should have known God's terms...terms that would allow Him to remove His discipline and bless them once again.

2. John's ministry style and success – vs. 4-6 - 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. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

John's appearance and style was unconventional and startling. You had to resist the urge to stare at him. He didn't look or dress anything like the religious leaders in Jerusalem! From the description of Elijah in **II Kings 1:8 – John dressed the same way. The king of Samaria said, "He was a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist."** But John wasn't Elijah resurrected or Elijah reincarnated. His ministry would have been like Elijah's if the nation turned to the Lord in a wholesale way. In **Matt. 11:12-14** Jesus said, **From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.** As it turned out, most were unwilling to come to God on His terms...terms set forth by John the Baptist. So John wasn't Elijah yet Elijah is still scheduled to appear someday. Many believe he will be one of the two witnesses prophesied to come in **Rev.11:3 – "And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth."**

News about John and his revolutionary message spread throughout Judea. **v.5 says, People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan.** I'm calling these people "average Judeans." They weren't the educated...they were working class folk...farmers / soldiers / tax collectors / and merchants. They were people who worked hard to raise a family and make ends meet. Like so many in today's economy, they had more mouth than money.

They were people burdened under the tyranny of Roman rule / heavy taxation / and the rigid requirements of their religion. They were weary of life / burdened by sin / concerned about their future / and in need of rest...people looking for answers...real people. To people in this category Jesus said, **"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."** This class of people is distinguished from the religious crowd of v.7. The difference between them is signaled by the conjunction, **"but."**

We know the convicting ministry of God's Holy Spirit was at work in hearts because John's message was received by many Judeans. v. 6 says **Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.** John's baptism wasn't a mere ritual. It wasn't like the ceremonial washings practiced by the Jews at Jerusalem. John practiced baptism by immersion. As a one time act, the whole person was lowered beneath the water and then raised from it. By this public act, the repentant sinner confessed His need of God's mercy. Those willing to admit their sin stepped forward to be baptized. The act was profound but the logistics were very simple. John didn't hold discipleship classes. He didn't conduct interviews or require anybody to fill out a readiness for baptism questionnaire. He didn't ask people to confess the sins of their parents, children or anybody else. His message was entirely personal. He simply called people to acknowledge their sins and turn to God by stepping forward to be baptized.

John's appeal exposes the biggest obstacle to evangelism and discipleship today. The obstacle is this...most people don't think they're sinners. As our culture moves away from God and His Word, we don't feel we have anything to confess or be concerned about. The Spirit of God brings conviction through the faithful declaration of God's truth. But in the absence of sound Bible teaching and preaching, sin in every category is rationalized, redefined and excused. Most people have no idea how terribly offensive their sin is to God! They live day to day giving no thought to the judgment ahead. The same was true in Israel until the Lord sent John.

From the beginning Satan tempted Adam and Eve to doubt God's Word. He still uses this same method today. We think we know better than God. Consider the uproar triggered whenever somebody takes God's side with regard to some moral issue. A few weeks ago the key word in Duck Dynasty switched from a noun to a verb. Duck now means duck! But everybody has an opinion. Everybody posts their beliefs. In all this noise, very few consider God's Word to be relevant. Posted on FB last week was the story of a church in Indiana. A new young pastor fired the church's beloved music director because he was gay. The whole congregation walked out on him. More distressing than the story itself was the comments made by friends of professing Christian who posted the story. Without exception, they berated the pastor for his lack of grace, and applauded the congregation for walking out. Is that how far we've fallen?

In the Garden, the Devil contradicted God. He told Eve, **"You will not surely die." (Gen. 3:4)** In other words, Satan planted the notion that God doesn't mean what you think He meant...He loves you...He'd never punish you! From the lips of John the Baptizer, these Judeans heard a message they weren't hearing at the Temple. The message resonated because it was true! John was Heaven's Public Address system and the Holy Spirit unplugged their ears to hear God speaking through him. This is what America desperately needs! We need ears to hear God's truth again. We need courage to stand for truth and speak it to others. When that happens, God's Spirit will do His part.

3. John's message to the religious – vs. 7-12 - But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.'

I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 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. "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

If John's tone was hot when speaking to the average Judean, it was white hot when addressing the religious leaders. The two major sects in Judaism were the **Pharisees** and **Sadducees**. The **Pharisees** were legalists and the **Sadducees** were liberals. Both believed salvation was gained by works and both felt they were OK in God's sight. In sheer arrogance they felt they were right with God and exempt from His wrath. They were just like so many religious people today. The hardest people to reach and the last to sense their need to repent are the religious.

At a memorial service last Monday, I preached the Gospel to a big group of religious people. They loved the eulogy and songs. They nodded with agreement at the nice things said about the deceased. But they glazed over when I preached the Gospel. They bristled when I said their baptism / church membership / religion / and good deeds couldn't save them. They bristled again when I quoted Scripture that says the only way to be saved is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. At that point I became a misguided protestant...a born-againer...an outsider to their church and system. They wrote me off. Praise God! His Word doesn't return void!

John didn't come wearing flowing robes. Like Dwight L. Moody and Billy Sunday, he wasn't educated at some approved seminary. God trained him and crafted his message in the desert. Yet John minced no words. He called this religious crowd a **brood of vipers**. I'm sure he never read How to Win Friends or Influence People! He never viewed his ministry as a popularity contest. Without apology, he boldly spoke God's truth and was eventually beheaded for doing so. Now a **brood** is the offspring or children of someone or something. A **viper** is a poisonous snake that can lie motionless like a dead branch. Then with lightning speed, it strikes with bite that's often fatal. This was the same snake that bit the Apostle Paul when he was shipwrecked on the Island of Malta. **Acts 28:3 - Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and, as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand.** God showed His power by protecting His servant and Paul was unharmed. He shook the snake off and it fell into the fire. Just like that snake that bit Paul, Satan's destiny is the Lake of fire. **Rev. 20:10 - And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.** But John here John confronted Satan's brood. They too will someday face the same destiny. Later Jesus spoke to Israel's religious leaders and said, **You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. – Jn. 8:44** The average person on the street doesn't realize the choice they've made. Jesus said we are for Him or against Him (**Matt. 12:30**). We are one or the other...a child of God or a child of the devil. There's no neutral ground.

John asked, **Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?** Like snakes fleeing a brushfire, John knew why these religious leaders had come. He knew they'd come to criticize and write John off as a lunatic. But in mercy God's Holy Spirit had drawn them to this place...even them! Despite their self-righteousness and arrogance, God was with holding the judgment they deserved while giving them yet another opportunity to hear His Word and repent. John encouraged them to consider God's mercy.

But the Jewish clergy felt they were safe from God's wrath because they were descendents of Abraham. We see that in **v.9**. They felt being a Jew meant they were alright.

They felt no need for repentance...no need to be concerned about living a changed life. They felt they were in a bubble of grace that automatically qualified them for the Kingdom. This is what religion does to people. It blinds people to the truth. But sectarian Christianity can have the same effect. I'm OK because I raised my hand as a child. I'm in because I walked an aisle and prayed a prayer at the end of an evangelistic meeting. I go to the right kind of church and use the right version of the Bible. I regularly attend Sunday School. I give an offering and support world missions. I'm OK!

As we'll see all throughout Matthew's Gospel, Jesus repudiated self-righteousness and reserved His strongest rebuke for the self-satisfied. He told these religious men that God could **raise up stones** to fulfill His promises to Abraham if they weren't willing to come to God on His terms. In **Jn. 8:39** Jesus rebuked their false sense of security. **"Abraham is our father," they answered. "If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do the things Abraham did.**

So John was preparing the way for Jesus. He told people it isn't good enough to be born to the right race and family. There must be repentance...not just a repentance of words...but a repentance of action...a changed life proved by good fruit. **v. 8 - Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.** What this means is fleshed out in Luke's Gospel. **Lk. 3:11-14 "What should we do then?" the crowd asked. John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely--be content with your pay."** Turning to God involves turning from selfishness to generosity / from cheating to honesty / and from greed and extortion to contentment.

Say, how is it with you? Does your life exhibit the fruits of repentance? Can others see that you've turned from a life of ignoring God to actively following Him? Is Christ your life goal and number one priority? Have you truly been born again? None of us can rely on our upbringing / our Christian family / or the fact that we call ourselves "Christian". Each person must come to King Jesus on His terms. We must repent of sin and prove our allegiance by surrendering to His Lordship.

In **v.10** the stakes are high. John said, **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.** God knows those who are faking it...sitting in church but just going through the motions. But He also knows each one who truly belongs to Him. The proof is the **fruit** a person's life produces...our attitudes, words and activities. Later Jesus said, **By their fruit you will recognize them. - Matt. 7:16**

As we finish, listen again to **v. 11, 12 - "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."** Here John used an analogy familiar to the the people of that day. After wheat was harvested, it was laid on a threshing floor. Using a flail, the farmer would beat the sheaves to separate the chaff or husk from the grain. Because the grain and the chaff were still mixed together, the farmer would then use a winnowing fork to toss the wheat into the air. Since the chaff is lighter, the breeze would carry the chaff off to the side and the heavier grains of wheat would drop to the ground. The chaff was then burned because it was of no value and useless.

Mark this down. John was describing a judgment executed by the Lord Jesus Christ. The winnowing fork **is in His hand.** We prefer the meek and mild Jesus. He's loving and kind.

He wouldn't harm anybody. He's the epitome of mercy, patience and understanding. He winks at bad behavior and tolerates immorality.

Wait a minute! Are you sure that's the Jesus of the Bible? The prophecies of Christ's return reveal a righteous judge who will return in awesome power and intolerant holiness. Here are a few examples.

- **Mal. 3:1, 2 - Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap.**
- **II Thess. 1:8 - 10 - He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed.**
- **Rev. 19:11-13 - I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God.**

Listen church, are we ready to meet King Jesus? The baptism of a believing sinner is non-repeatable. But repentance isn't a one time thing. As long as sin is in our fallen being...as long as we move about in this world of sin...we need to maintain an attitude of repentance before the God who is holy and pure. If Jesus was here...I mean standing right here in front of us...if He said, **Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is near**...would you blow Him off? Would your mind retreat to all the good things you've done? Would you compare yourself to somebody who has failed more grievously than you have? Or would you bow before Him in brokenness and contrition?

Being ready to meet the king is a heart thing. It's a willingness to admit who we are and how much we need God's mercy and grace. This heart preparation was the essence of the ministry of this man we call John the Baptizer.