

Repent, The Kingdom of Heaven Is Near

Matthew 3:1-17

Key Verse: 3:2

“...and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’”

In today's passage we learn how John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus, the King, and how Jesus entered into public ministry. At that time, people were suffering under Roman oppression. They suffered politically, economically, morally and socially. They had no hope. They were frustrated, angry and bitter. Many had various diseases and some were demon possessed. The religious and political leaders did not give them any hope. Rather, they crushed people with heavy demands, increasing their burden. The people were living in darkness and in the shadow of death (4:16). At this time of despair, God sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for the Lord. John came and delivered the message of hope by introducing Jesus as God's King. They needed King Jesus. We can understand the people of John's time. We, too, face many challenging problems. Moral corruption has produced terrible violence and the breakdown of the family. We face terrorist activity, high unemployment, a huge national debt, and many kinds of diseases-including mental disorders, and natural disasters, and so on. This causes many to complain and blame others. But who can solve these problems? We desperately need real hope. We need fundamental solutions, not superficial quick fixes. Jesus came to solve our problems fundamentally. We have true hope in Jesus. Let's learn from John the Baptist how to have this hope.

Verses 1-12 tell us how God sent John before Jesus as his forerunner. We will think about John's message (1-2), and John's ministry (3-12). Verses 13-17 tell us how Jesus began his public ministry.

First, John's message (1-2)

Look at verse 1. **“In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea...”** John came to help people prepare for Jesus' coming. Before the coming of the King, preparation was necessary. We can relate to this. Recently, President Obama visited Chicago to appear on the Oprah Winfrey show. In order to prepare for his coming, many workers cleaned his reelection headquarters downtown. Secret service agents and Chicago policemen made straight the way to Oprah's studio. Many people were inconvenienced and some complained, but this kind of preparation was necessary. In a similar way, preparation was necessary for the King's coming. However, the preparation for

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King Jesus is quite different than that of our president. It requires preparing people's hearts.

Verse 1 tells us that John preached in the wilderness of Judea. John's working place was in the wilderness, not in a palace or in a huge skyscraper. The wilderness is quiet and secluded, removed from the bustle of daily life. It is a good place to listen to the word of God. If John lived in our times, he might have refrained from watching the news too much, or using cell phones or social networking, in order to avoid mind-cluttering chit chat. In this way John heard God's word clearly and grasped God's message for his people. Then John preached this message. John was primarily a preacher of God's word, not a social worker, an activist, or an environmentalist.

What was John's message? Let's read verse 2. **"...and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'"** It was not long and complicated; it was short and simple. We find two main elements: the admonishment to repent, and the hope of the kingdom of heaven. Many people, when they hear the word "repent" have an allergic reaction. They assume they will be condemned without hope, and receive another heavy load upon their already burdened shoulders. The people of John's time might have felt the same way. In their desperate situation, they wanted a message of comfort. Yet John said "repent." When we understand real repentance, we find that it is indeed a message of comfort and hope.

To repent is "to change your way," or "to change direction positively." It is to turn from the world to God, from being self-centered to being God-centered. Many think of repentance as improving oneself, as though it were merely another kind of self-help like continuing education, improving diet and exercise, reading good books, practicing yoga, etc. But it is much more than that. It is turning our hearts to God. This has been God's unchanging message to people. The Old Testament prophets said repeatedly, **"Repent...come to God"** (Isa 30:15; Eze 14:6; Hos 14:1). John, Jesus and Jesus' disciples preached the message of repentance (Mt 4:17; Mk 6:12). Paul declared that both Jews and Greeks-all people-must turn to God in repentance and have faith in Jesus (Ac 20:21). Why does God give this message to his people repeatedly? It is because repentance is the only way to enter God's kingdom and have eternal life, avoiding destruction (Ac 2:40).

True repentance brings us into relationship with God's King, Jesus. At Pentecost, Peter addressed people, including those responsible for Jesus' death (Ac 2:23). Peter proclaimed that Christ had risen and was at the right hand of God the

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Father as the King of kings. People were cut to the heart and said, **“What shall we do?” Peter answered, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins”** (Ac 2:38a). In response, some 3,000 people repented and the Christian church was born. Jesus reigned over the lives of its members. It was a Jesus-centered community that revealed Jesus’ holiness, love and blessing to the world. Paul was once a persecutor of Jesus’ people. Then he met the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, and realized that Jesus is Lord (Ac 9:5). From that time on, he gave his heart to Jesus and preached Jesus as the Son of God (Ac 9:20). Paul changed from a self-centered person to a Jesus-centered person. This change affected his inner desires, life direction, value system, words and behavior, and everything. This is real repentance.

After the message of repentance came the message of hope. This tells us why we repent: **“...for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”** What does this mean? It means that God's King has come to reign. As Matthew chapters 1-2 attest, Jesus is God’s King. God sent his King into this world to restore a relationship with those who accept him. He solves our fundamental problem. Due to our broken relationship with God, man lost paradise. Then the power of sin and death and Satan began to reign in men’s hearts. This brought moral corruption, poverty, misery, bitterness, strife, social chaos, war, death, and the like. All human misery stems from refusing God’s reign. This problem cannot be solved by means of education, technology, material abundance or any human means. The so-called elite people of our society are often the most miserable. Without God and the paradise he gives, no one can be happy. Only when we repent and receive Jesus as our King is paradise restored for us. Jesus brings us true life, peace and joy, happiness and abundance. Jesus fills our hearts with thanksgiving and enables us to live in harmony with him, with others and in his world. Though the world may be messed up, we can enjoy paradise in our hearts when Jesus is our King. This paradise can spread to families, communities, and nations.

The most recent issue of Time magazine told the story of Ruslana Korshunova. She was a gorgeous supermodel known as “Russian Rapunzel” for her heavy, golden hair. She became very famous for a particular perfume advertisement which spread throughout Russia and the world. She was on the threshold of great fame and wealth which thousands of supermodel wannabes only dream about. However, she jumped out of her New York high rise and committed suicide at the age of 20. Several explanations were given. But the simple truth is that without Jesus, she was under the power of sin, death and the devil, and felt too miserable to live. On the other hand, there was another young lady who also tasted the emptiness and misery of the fashion world. But she turned to Jesus for help

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through deep Bible study. Jesus came into her heart as King to reign. Jesus blessed her to grow in holiness and love, and gave her true joy and peace. Moreover, she married the most wonderful man of God and went to Canada as a missionary. She now has three lovely children and many Bible students. Her name is Jennifer Stumpf. What is the difference between these two women? Jesus. Jesus came to this world as our King, to reign in our hearts, and to bring us life and joy and peace. When Jesus reigns in us, he restores paradise.

Second, John's ministry (3-9)

John's life was governed by the word of God. Look at verse 3. **“This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: ‘A voice of one calling in the wilderness, “Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.””** John's coming fulfilled prophecy. It was God who planned John's coming. It was God who sent John. It is God who raises and sends servants to preach his message. So if we desire a revival movement, we must pray to God for it. St. George UBF has revived last year. This happened after Dr. Henry Kim and his coworkers devoted themselves to prayer. God answered.

Verse 4 describes John's lifestyle. He wore clothing made of camel's hair and had a leather belt around his waist. He looked like Elijah, the great Old Testament prophet (2 Ki 1:8). To follow Elijah's footsteps was to go the way of suffering and eternal glory. John embraced this lifestyle willingly. John's food was locusts and wild honey. One joy of life is to eat a delicious meal. But John subsisted on food that did not require much effort. John lived a simple and pure life. This allowed him to focus on listening to God's word and preaching it. John's devoted life was one reason his message was so powerful. If anyone wants to deliver God's word with power, it must come from a devoted life. Dr. Joseph Chung's Bible teaching in Uganda has been very powerful. He feeds many sheep, and they began to worship God. The whole ministry was influenced until the number of one-to-one Bible studies tripled. When Dr. Chung was in Chicago recently I had a chance to observe his life. On that February day when the most snow fell, Dr. Chung drove to visit his sheep for Bible study. He was the only person in the whole city who was trying to drive. He looked crazy. This revealed his wholehearted devotion to Jesus and his sheep. It is why his Bible teaching is so powerful.

In verses 5-6, we can see how people responded. Did they get upset and file a grievance against John for using the word “repent”? No. They came to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. They stopped

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everything they were doing and went to John. Then they confessed their sins and were baptized by him in the Jordan River. It was a great spiritual revival. Here we can learn that people suffered from their sins, not just their situations. We human beings really need the message of repentance to lead us to confess our sins before God. This brings real relief to our souls. This is why we should share the message of repentance-not with self-righteous arrogance, but with the humility of a fellow sinner.

The scene at the Jordan was truly beautiful in the sight of God. People were freely confessing their sins to be right with God. But the Pharisees and Sadducees came for a different purpose. They wanted to see what was going on. Most likely, they came as judges of John's ministry. Outwardly, they looked impressive with their priestly garments, advanced degrees, and establishment power. But inwardly they were proud and self-righteous. They were like silky looking vipers with poison inside. John perceived their inner condition precisely and rebuked them severely. He challenged them to produce fruits in keeping with repentance. Repentance is not a one-time event; it must be "kept with." Real repentance produces fruit. This fruit is a changed life. We learn here that we need to empty our self-righteousness and pride that comes from a title or some spiritual privilege or seniority. We need to produce good fruits of a godly character. This comes through repentance. God wants to transform our lives from selfish to sacrificial, from proud to humble, from greedy to generous, from lazy to hard-working, from lustful to pure, from self-centered to God-centered and other-centered.

John Newton was the son of an English sailor and a devout Christian mother, who passed away when he was seven. John became a sailor like his dad. However, against his will, he was forced to join the Royal Navy. He tried to escape and was flogged publicly before 350 crewmen. He became so rebellious that he was transferred to a slave ship. There he became even more rebellious. So the captain of the slave ship gave John to his wife, an African princess, to be her slave. She enjoyed mistreating him in many ways. It was only by the intervention of his father's friend that John escaped. As he sailed back to England, his ship met a severe storm off the coast of Donegal and almost sank. John awoke to a cabin filling with water. At that moment, he remembered Bible verses which his mother had taught him. He began to turn to God in repentance. The storm ended, but his repentance did not. He sought God diligently through Bible reading. He stopped swearing, gambling and drinking. Yet he continued in the slave trade for several years until a stroke forced him to stay on land. Then he studied to be a pastor. He grew spiritually in the knowledge of God and in his compassion for others. He was a good spiritual influence on the abolitionist William Wilberforce and the hymn

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writer William Cowper. Though Cowper was a sincere Christian, he was subject to deep bouts of depression. At such times, Newton loved and served him until he recovered. Newton grew steadily as a shepherd for all around him. Then, 31 years after his conversion, he publicly renounced the slave trade in a forceful pamphlet, "Thoughts Upon the Slave Trade." This helped bring an end to slavery in the British Empire. This may have marked the full fruits of his changed life. We can learn here that repentance is not a one-time emotional response. It is something we must keep with throughout our lifetimes until it bears the full measure of fruit God wants.

Why should we bear good fruit? Verse 10 clearly tells that those who do not bear good fruit will be judged by Jesus. We will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. This will happen when he comes or when we leave this world. It could be any time.

Third, John tells the work of Jesus (11-12)

People were amazed at John's spiritual authority to lead people to repent and rebuke the religious leaders. But John did not enjoy people's admiration. Rather, he used his influence to fulfill his mission by pointing people to Jesus. In verses 11-12 he emphasizes that Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire. This tells us two things about Jesus.

In the first place, Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit. Through faith in Jesus we can receive the Holy Spirit into our hearts. The Holy Spirit works within to fully accomplish what repentance can only begin. Actually, no one can change his sinful nature by human willpower. But the Holy Spirit burns away our sinful nature, putting it to death. The Holy Spirit creates new life in us. The Holy Spirit truly and fundamentally changes us into a new creation.

In the second place, Jesus baptizes with fire. The word "fire" appears three times in verses 10-12 and refers primarily to the fire of judgment. It alludes to eternal condemnation in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. Jesus is not only the King who saves. Jesus is also the King who Judges. Those who resist God's reign will be put into eternal condemnation. God's kingdom will not be ruined by his enemies. God will destroy his enemies through his King Jesus. God's kingdom will be filled with those who accept Jesus as King and are changed into his holy and beautiful image as God's children.

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Fourth, Jesus' baptism (13-17)

Look at verse 13. Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. John knew Jesus. Jesus did not need a baptism of repentance, for he had no sin. John was embarrassed and said, **“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me? Oh no!”** Jesus said, **“Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness”** (15). Then John consented. Jesus was baptized because it was right with God. In this way, Jesus recognized John as God's servant and John's ministry as God's preparation for his coming. Jesus humbly honored John and stepped into God's history with a willing decision to fulfill the mission of the Messiah. Jesus also identified with sinners. Jesus' baptism is the marvelous grace of God. Often, when a main character comes, he ignores those who prepared the way. But God honored John greatly. In John's own eyes, his ministry was insignificant compared to that of Jesus. Yet God gave John the privilege of baptizing Jesus. Jesus obeyed God without hesitation. Jesus is truly a humble King.

Look at verses 16-17. **“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. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’”** Thus far, heaven had been closed. There was a great barrier between God and man because of our sins. But Jesus, who is both the perfect God and the perfect man, came to be a Mediator between God and us. Now heaven is opened. The barrier was removed and true reconciliation started. The Spirit of God descended on Jesus like a dove. A dove is they symbol of peace and meekness and humbleness and purity. This tells us the nature of our King Jesus. Jesus is a peacemaker. Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but to save the world. Jesus did not come to crush people from the top down, but to serve us with grace and compassion. So Jesus said later, **“I am gentle and humble in heart. Come to me and I will give you rest”** (Mt 11:28-30).

God was pleased with Jesus' baptism. God confirmed Jesus' identity as the Son of God by his own word from heaven. God expressed his love for Jesus and his pleasure in Jesus. At Jesus' coming, heaven began to smile. It was the beginning of the restoration of God's reign in men's heart and on the earth. It was the indication that everything was going to be all right.

We have many problems. Sometimes we struggle with these problems so much that we cannot see beyond them. But the real solution is to repent and accept Jesus as our King. Jesus restores paradise in our lives. And like John the Baptist,

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we should share this message of repentance and the kingdom with others. It is the only true hope for the people of our time.