

## Matthew 3.1-4 'Prepare the Way of the Lord' Transcript

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In 1960, archaeologists were excavating sites in Masada, which was the location of where Herod the Great's temple was. We've learned about this so far in Matthew's gospel. During their excavation, they discovered sealed clay jars, and inside these jars, when they were opened, they found seeds that were identified as belonging to the Judean date palm tree. These seeds were 2,000 years old and had been sealed in this jar for all that time. Later on, in 2005, researchers successfully germinated one of these seeds and nicknamed it Methuselah, after the oldest man in the Bible. This ancient tree, which led to further agricultural insights of the time, was revived.

We might picture the time between the closing of the Old Testament in Malachi and the coming of Christ in the New Testament as comparable to those seeds in that sealed clay pot—preserved but not lost, simply dormant, awaiting the time of germination and growth when God would bring about His word.

The intertestamental period, as we call it, from Malachi to the opening of Matthew's gospel, was 400 years without a prophetic voice among the people of God. They had the scripture and the customs, but this was a time of dramatic change in the land of Israel. They were, of course, an occupied nation. There was what was called the Hellenizing of the Jews, meaning the Greek culture heavily influenced the thoughts and customs of the people. Many thought that this was all over; God had turned away from Israel. There was 400 years of silence without a prophetic voice, like those seeds in that clay jar sealed away.

Though Matthew has introduced us to Christ already, it is in fact another man who will open up Jesus' ministry on His behalf. Now we come to Matthew 3, where we meet John the Baptist, called the forerunner of Christ. He is the one who first explodes onto the scene, and God's prophetic witness speaks again.

To learn about John the Baptist, we have to turn to Luke chapter 1. You don't have to do that now; you can read there later. Luke gives us more information about John the Baptist's background. We learn that he was the son of two devout believing Levites, so he is of priestly descent. The tribe of Levi served as the priestly lineage. His father's name was Zacharias, who served in the temple, and his mother's name was Elizabeth. Given that scripture tells us John's mother was related to Jesus' mother Mary, Jesus and John were likely cousins of some description, with about a six-month age gap between them. They were undoubtedly close friends growing up. In fact, Jesus would later say in Matthew 11 of John, "Truly I say to you, among those born of women, there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist."

John fulfills a special prophetic role in the Gospels. Luke 1:15 tells us that God uniquely regenerated John while he was yet in the womb of his mother. It says, "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and he will drink no wine or liquor," meaning he is consecrated to God. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb. John's life was to be one of prophetic significance, and he would serve as the last prophet of the Old Testament order. His calling from the womb likens him to that of Jeremiah the prophet. Jeremiah 1:5 says, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; before you were born, I consecrated you. I have appointed you as a prophet to the nations." John the Baptist is precisely the same in this way; he is to be the forerunner, the one who goes before and introduces the nation to their Messiah, Jesus Christ.

It's important to understand that John is the link between the Old Testament witness to Christ and Christ's physical arrival. He is the connective tissue, in a way, between the Old Testament and the New. We see this most clearly in two particular ways. First, the location of John's ministry tells us a lot. It says that John came preaching in the wilderness of Judea. The wilderness, his location of ministry, is significant. This is in eastern Israel. If you can imagine the Dead Sea on the eastern border of Israel, and in the north of the Dead Sea is the Jordan River, where John spent much of his ministry.

This ought to ring some bells, as one scholar, Donald English, points out. The wilderness and the Jordan River have historical importance for the people. It was Lot who chose the plains of Jordan when given the opportunity in Genesis 13. Jacob, renamed Israel, crossed the Jordan on his way to meet Esau in Genesis 33. Joshua led the people of Israel across the Jordan into the promised land in Joshua 3. The ministries of the prophets Elijah and Elisha focused on the Jordan. Who could forget that this is where the nation wandered for 40 years, sustained by God's goodness? Therefore, in preaching and baptizing in the wilderness, John is calling up many of the sacred memories of Israel and directing them all to Jesus. This was all pointing to Christ.

He must increase, John says; I must decrease. John says of Christ, "I'm not even worthy to untie His sandals." And yet, among men, there was no man greater than John. Donald English says, "Where better to preach and baptize than in the place where current political tensions, past sacred memories, and cherished future hopes met?" John comes in the wilderness as a prophetic witness for God.

Secondly, Matthew shows us that John is the link between Christ and the Old Testament promise through his relation to Elijah the prophet. What's the connection with Elijah? Before the coming of the Messiah, the Jewish expectation was for an Elijah-type figure to emerge. If you take Malachi 4:5, for example, it says, "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord." Before the Lord would come in all His power and glory, there was going to be an Elijah-type figure. Jesus will later identify that prophecy as speaking of John the Baptist.

We read later in Matthew 17:10-13, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" He answered and said, "Elijah is coming and will restore all things. But I say to you that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." Then it says, "Then the disciples understood that He, that is Jesus, had spoken to them about John the Baptist." Jesus identifies John as fulfilling that expectation of an Elijah-type prophet.

We can see this ourselves because the description of John's person bears likeness to the prophet Elijah. He serves in the wilderness as Elijah did, away from the densely populated areas where most people lived. His attire is also likened to the prophets. 2 Kings 1:8 says, "Elijah was a hairy man with a leather girdle bound around his loins."

This is not at all dissimilar to what we find in Matthew's description in verse 4 of John the Baptist.

Given these facts, it's understandable why we call John the forerunner or the waymaker of the Messiah. His ministry begins slightly earlier than Jesus. He cultivates the spiritual soil to direct people to Christ. He is the herald declaring that the King is here, and he will publicly identify Jesus as the Lamb of God. This particularly comes out in John as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He will mark out Christ for the purpose for which He came.

We see something of this calling, this forerunner idea, in the text quoted here from Isaiah 40:3 in Matthew 3. It says, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Clear the way for the Lord; make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.'" If you keep reading from Isaiah 40, it says, "Let every valley be lifted up and every mountain be made low; let the rough ground become plain and the rugged territory a broad valley." In other words, if the valleys are to be lifted up and the mountains are to be brought low, it is to make a straight path for travel. The rough ground is to become plain, and the rugged terrain a broad, easy-to-travel valley.

This is to say John's role, his work, is to prepare the way of the Messiah, to prepare the people to receive the Messiah. This was what John's ministry was all about: to remove all obstacles and prepare for the coming of God in all His glory and Christ. This is what John's ministry was about. The dormant seed, as it were, in those clay pots, silent for 400 years, begins to bear the fruit of God's purposes and the coming of the Messiah and His kingdom.

So, what's the big idea of this passage? This passage shows John the Baptist preparing the people of Israel's hearts to recognize and receive Christ, who comes after him. John comes sent by God to testify of Christ, to go before Him, to preach and to baptize. We'll look at the significance of John's baptism next time.

The need of man, the world, you and I this morning, has not changed. We find ourselves hearing John's preaching, needing to have exactly the same response as the people who first heard it. Jesus, the Messiah, inaugurates the kingdom of heaven in His first advent. The kingdom is all about and centered around Christ, and repentance of sins is necessary on man's part if he is to enter and receive Christ's benefits. This applies to all of us with the same level of urgency. We must hear the

testimony of John calling to us to have repentance of our sins and commit wholly to God, to come to know Christ as our personal Savior.

It's only by this means that we can personally experience entrance into the kingdom of heaven, now inaugurated in Christ's own person and coming.

So, to the biblical text now, I want to keep things really simple this morning. I've given you some background on John, and that's all we need for now. We want to simply focus on the message of John the Baptist and what we find in these opening verses. What we find is, firstly, it's a message of repentance of sins before God, and secondly, it's repentance as it relates to the kingdom of heaven, which comes to the world in the person of Christ. This is where our focus will be.

First of all, consider with me his preaching on repentance. I have an illustration for you. There's a man by the name of Frederick Charrington, born in the mid-1800s. He was a member of a very wealthy family in England that owned a partnership in the Charrington brewery, which produced alcoholic beverages. Frederick was heir to a fortune of a million and a quarter pounds in the currency of the day. If you can imagine the amount that is worth today, it was a huge fortune—a very wealthy man.

When Frederick was just 19 years old, he was in London with some friends when he noticed a drunken man stumbling out of a pub. A woman, who was his wife, was desperately clinging to him, pleading with him to stop spending his money on drink. She said, "I haven't eaten for a week, and the kids haven't eaten for two days." The drunken husband struck his wife to the ground. Frederick, just 19 years old, leapt to her defense. He grabbed the man, pulling him away and pinning his arms while his friends helped the woman.

After the situation had dissolved, Frederick noticed on the side of the pub that the man had come out of, "Drink Charrington Ale." He saw his own family name on the pub that this man had come out of. He would later write, "I was stricken just as surely as Paul on the Damascus Road. Here was the source of my family wealth, and it was producing untold human misery before my eyes." Then and there, he pledged to God that not another penny of that money should come to him. Frederick renounced his family inheritance and fortune, devoting the rest of his life and ministry to helping the poor, opening a school, and helping free men and women from the curse of alcoholism.

A heart of repentance of sins is truly a heart change, and it brings a whole new direction of life. This is what it means to repent; it brings radical change to a person's life. When we experience repentance, friends, it becomes as clear to us as the difference between light and darkness that our lives can never be the same. We are no longer settled in a state of sin, but we will throw ourselves continually upon God in His grace and mercy.

Frederick underwent a conversion experience for him, a deep-seated change outside of that pub on a London night. It flipped upside down all of his aspirations, hopes, and dreams because he recognized that this was not a godly means that he could pursue any longer. He had to revoke what he saw then as worldliness so that he might pursue God's causes with his life. This is what repentance does; it brings a 180-degree turning away from his former life. Something similar is happening through the preaching of John the Baptist.

As the people of Israel journey out to him in the wilderness, they undergo a profound transformation as they repent and confess their sins to God. These are Jewish people, remember—children of the covenant. Yet they are recognizing that perhaps their religion had been a great hindrance to faith in the true and everlasting God. They are dedicating and rededicating themselves through repentance to God as the prophet is in the wilderness preaching.

In fact, in Mark's account, it reads in Mark 1:5, "All the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem, and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins." So God's prophet is in the wilderness, and his message is that of repentance. The Lord is blessing what is typically unpopular preaching—unpopular preaching that many preachers avoid. They try not to offend the ears of people, but from God's prophet, we hear these very words.

Repentance here means to change the mind, to think again, to think correctly concerning sin. Repentance is to recognize that we all have guilt before God's law as the standard. It's to realize that we have each violated the divine law and to recognize that we have deeply indwelling personal sin, unworthiness of self before God, and that the justice of God would bring about His swift wrath upon us if it were not for His mercy extended in Christ.

It's man's duty to repent of his sins in order to receive the forgiveness of God for his sins. Repentance is not simply to be depressed or remorseful about your condition.

True repentance brings you to God in confession for that sin. If you think about Judas, for example, in Matthew 27:3, we learn that Judas became remorseful. In fact, Judas even confessed his sin to man. He said, "I've betrayed innocent blood," and he threw the money he was given away, discarding what he received to betray Christ. He had remorse, you see, for his sin, but it didn't lead to repentance. He never confessed his sin and went to God with it. He declared his sin, but he did not repent.

Jesus said Himself in Luke 5:32, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." Christ is calling His people to repentance, to believe upon Him. Brothers and sisters, reflect on the preaching of John and see if there is in your own hearts a response to this call to have repentance of sin before God. Remove all obstacles that stand in the way of your reception of the Messiah, who came in His kingdom 2,000 years ago.

The principle is clear: unless we ourselves repent, we can have no part in the kingdom of God, no part with Christ. All the church attendance, all the service, all the good works will do nothing for us if we have no repentance of sin towards God. This is the message of John: repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Secondly, let's consider John's preaching on the kingdom. John's preaching was concerning what is called here the kingdom of heaven. Now, Matthew prefers to refer to the kingdom of heaven for the majority of his time in his gospel, while the other gospels prefer the kingdom of God. There is no discernible difference. It would be a nuanced point to discuss why Matthew chose to refer to the kingdom of heaven, but there is no discernible difference.

The kingdom of heaven is at hand, says John, and that is the driving motivation of special urgency for man to repent. The Messiah is coming; therefore, repent. Repentance in the New Testament is the Old Testament equivalent to a recommittal to God in His covenant—a forsaking of that which encumbers us in our relationship with God, namely sin.

So John is telling us that in order to participate in the kingdom of heaven that Christ inaugurates in His coming, personal repentance is a prerequisite for us to enter. John is saying the Lord is coming in all His glory; the Messiah is here, and your great need is to confess your sins and call upon the Lord. Without that, we're not prepared. The valleys are still low, the mountains are still high, and the way to God is not clear if we have no repentance.

If you look down at verses 8 and 9 of Matthew 3, John says, "Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance, and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children for Abraham." John is reminding the Jews that their personal relationship to God was not to be based on anything external, such as their biology or their connection to Abraham and the covenantal promises. Rather, John is saying it's the inward disposition of the heart of man that God is concerned about.

To enter God's kingdom, it's either going to be a heart of faith and repentance or a heart of unbelief. Jew and Gentile alike, repentance and faith towards God is required. He says, "For I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham," meaning no one is to presume upon salvation. In fact, we see Jews here repenting of their sin and being baptized, which was reserved pre-New Testament for Gentile converts to Judaism only. It's a very significant thing to see Jews being baptized in a cleansing ritual.

They've realized that perhaps true faith for them had been hindered by their religion because it had produced a works-based righteousness. The same can be true of us when we are born into the context of the Christian church. One might easily go through the motions, even for a lifetime, but the heart possesses no repentance towards God. It's just external Christianity, but not internal Christianity—unwilling to confess your unworthiness of God's mercy.

But without repentance, we are like the tree that he then talks about in verse 10. The axe is laid at the root of the tree, waiting to be cut down and burned if it does not bear the fruit of repentance. We find this exact same preaching in the ministry of Jesus. John's opening message and Jesus' opening message are identical. Mark 1:15 says, "The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the gospel," Jesus says.

Now, how should we understand John's reference to the kingdom of heaven? What is the kingdom of heaven? There will be plenty of time in Matthew's gospel for discussing the nature of the kingdom. Understand now that the kingdom refers to God's coming rule, what we call for now the already-but-not-yet kingdom. This is why I'm saying this language of kingdom inaugurated, awaiting kingdom consummated. It's already here, but it's not yet here. That's how we're to understand it.



From the beginning of time, since the fall, the anticipation has always been that God would move in such a way as to bring His universal kingdom rule—the amalgamation of heaven and earth. God's glory will consume the heavenly realm and will consume the earth. They are very different in the new creation. This has been the anticipation from the beginning, and Christ's first advent, His first coming, inaugurates this kingdom.

Jesus Christ brings the king and kingdom rule, and those who unite through His death and resurrection will become participants in this kingdom upon His return. John asserts that the kingdom has arrived and is in the process of revealing itself in the Messiah, who fulfills God's kingdom program.

I've listened to these words from Luke 17:20. "Now having been questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He, that is Jesus, answered them and said, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say, "Look, here it is," or "There it is," for behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst,'" He said. Why is that? Because the kingdom was inaugurated in Christ, and all who are united to Christ are participants in the kingdom. It's in the midst because it's an offer of salvation before them, all bound up in Jesus.

So the message of John is to prepare your hearts for the reception of the Messiah and His kingdom by bearing fruit in repentance for sins towards God. That's the message of Matthew 3:1-4. A couple of quick applications:

The first one is this: don't minimize the centrality of repentance for the Christian in daily life. This isn't to be confused with a re-receiving of our justification in Christ. Once we are in Christ, born again by the Spirit, and we have justification declared as righteous before God, we truly are saved, and we have assurance of our salvation through His word.

Through His promise, He will never abandon those who have called upon His name, who have believed and followed Christ. But this is not to say that in our sanctification, in our ongoing Christian life, there is not a need for a daily confession of sins. In fact, it's wise to remember what the Lord's Prayer says: "Forgive us our trespasses."

In your daily prayers, you should spend some time before you get to requests to God, confessing to Him your own guilt and unworthiness to come to Him in prayer. Thank

Him for the gift of Christ in the gospel. Position your heart in a place where you are humble, and you can then pray concerning your requests. He will hear you and respond to you as a father to His child.

We should not minimize the centrality of repentance for the Christian in daily life. Ask yourself, when was the last time I spent time on my knees by my bed in confession? My heart is so often astray; my heart is so often not right. There is sin in me. Father, wash me afresh. Father, renew me in Your Spirit. Wash me again, I pray, Lord Jesus. We need this in our sanctification. It keeps us humble and keeps us postured before the Lord in a way that He can use us, and we can be of service to Him.

Our second application would be this: through repentance, we consecrate ourselves to God and His kingdom each new day. I did a little bit of reading, and there is some understanding that for those Jews in John's time, as they hear this call to repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand, there is not only in their understanding at the time in this language of repentance an understanding of direct confession of sin, but there was also an understanding that repentance was also a consecration to God.

So it had, as primarily, an element of confession of sin, but it was bound up in this language of repentance as consecration to God. "God, I commit to following You. I commit to living according to Your will, to love Your statutes, to love Your commands." It's an active pursuit of righteousness in that way; it's a pursuing of God. This is what's going on here when the people are in their repentance.

We should frame it in that way as well. Yes, have this confession of sin, but yes, also in your repentance, understand you are consecrating yourself to God. "Lord, I will win this day for You. I will serve You this day. I will sanctify my mind so that my thoughts may not sin against You this day." This is what we are actively doing as Christians as we ponder and reflect on these words of John the Baptist, the forerunner to the Messiah.

Let's pray.