

## Matthew 3.5-12 'A Warning in the Wilderness' Transcript

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We tend to minimize things in our lives which are of tremendous importance, but inconvenient facts at the time. You will immediately know what I mean by this. Just think, for example, life might get really busy, but it's going well. Everything feels like it's heading in a good direction, and the projects you're trying to accomplish are just going really well. And all of a sudden, you begin to get symptoms of a health condition. But you put it to the back of your mind, thinking it will just go away, or you fear that you might get a poor diagnosis, and it's just too inconvenient at that time in your life. Thinking it will just disappear and vanish.

But what you need to do at that moment is get down to the doctor immediately. Maybe you own a business, and a significant portion of that is online, and you know that you need better cyber security practices, but you're just putting it aside. Your whole business is at risk because you're not acting upon what you know is true. It's a little bit like the NASA space shuttle, the Challenger, which launched from Florida on January 28th, 1986, and just a minute after takeoff, it blew up mid-air. For 12 hours before the launch, engineers had told NASA management about their concerns over these flight-critical O-rings, which were not designed for anything less than 53 degrees Fahrenheit, and the launch pad that day was 36 degrees Fahrenheit. NASA, however, deemed the risks appropriate for launch, but really they were just

putting behind them what they knew was true for the sake of public relations pressure.

You see, the bad news they really should have heeded and delayed the launch based on was just deemed too inconvenient a fact to act on, and they thought, "Oh, it'll be all right." You know, the Bible has a lot of bad news, just as it does good news. We need to hear both. The bad news is that mankind is universally in a state of sin before God, deserving of divine justice and judgment. The good news is that God, in His mercy, provides in Christ a way of escape for all who believe by faith in Him. But tragically for many people, this news is just too inconvenient. The evidence is before them, but they just don't want to believe it. It requires too much change. The cost factor of following Jesus Christ is too much for them. They want to go their own way, and they will continue headlong and tragically to their own demise.

You see, people will procrastinate over their eternity. Isn't that something? People will procrastinate over their eternity. And they'll say, "You know, one day I should really deal with this Jesus stuff." But not today. Not today. The message of the text of interest to us this morning is such that we might hear something that we want to just put to the back of our mind and not worry about it. But how foolish we would be. How we need to hear John's warning in the wilderness. How we need to hear that this life shall soon be over and all that really matters is what we have done with God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and His gospel. Whether we are repentant of our sins or hardened in our sins, whether we are responsive to the gospel or unyielding to the gospel, whether we will be with our God and His eternal love or His eternal contempt when this life is over. These are the themes and the urgency of the ministry and preaching of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ.

Now to summarize this passage, John the Baptist's prophetic ministry, as we have seen something of last week, his mission was to prepare the nation for the arrival of the Messiah. And so he called for the people to consecrate themselves before God through confession of sin, symbolizing their need for cleansing and forgiveness with this unprecedented right of Jewish baptism in the Jordan River. John confronts the Pharisees and Sadducees in our passage, and he reminds them that their heritage was of no use without the fruit of repentance for sins and faith. John emphasizes that his ministry was merely preparatory for the one coming after him, that is Christ, who would

baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire for either purification and cleansing or fire and impending judgment upon the unbelieving world.

And so that's what we find in our passage this morning, and I want to move through under a few headings. The first I have for you comes in verses five and six: baptizing the repentant. The more I have read this text, the more I have appreciated the extraordinary scene that is unfolding here at the Jordan River and in the ministry of John. Matthew specifically tells us that not only was all Judea going out to him, but he specifically states Jerusalem was going out to John. Jerusalem was the spiritual hub of the people of Israel, the heartbeat of the nation, and they are traveling out to the far eastern border of the land to find a young prophet of just 30 years old, John the Baptist, dressed in a rather unsightly manner with camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, eating locusts and wild honey. It's hardly an attractive sight, isn't it? Imagine if I came in myself dressed like this this morning. You'd run a million miles from this place.

They come to hear the Lord's prophet. Masses of people were traveling out to him. They come to hear what no one really wants to hear, to repent of sin guilt, to turn from your sins and look to God, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. And so they come to John at the Jordan River, and we find something quite striking here as well because not only are they confessing their sins, but they are being baptized in the Jordan River. Interesting. The question is, what is the nature of this baptism that John was administering? And what we witness here is truly unprecedented. There was until now no Jewish rite of baptism. There was a Gentile proselyte conversion to Judaism where they would undergo cleansing rituals which could be tantamount to a form of baptism. But there are so many differences with what John is doing that we really can't compare the two. It cannot be a one-to-one comparison.

And so my contention, along with others, is that what John is doing here in his baptism is to be understood in the context of his chosen location, the Jordan River. It appears that what we have here is a picture of a mass exodus of the people out of the land and re-entering the land. It appears to be a spiritual re-enactment of when the nation had first entered the land under Joshua. So just imagine the districts around the Jordan, Jerusalem, the cities, all the land of Judea, they're all pouring out of the land right to the eastern border to the Jordan River. It's almost like a picture of an exodus. They're all traveling out to

John. There they are baptized, immersed in the waters, and then you can imagine them all rolling back into their homes, and it's like a re-entry into the land. Imagine that scene. It's powerful, and with it, the memories of the nation re-emerge as through the waters people are consecrated to God.

Because two of the most important events in the Jews' history involve them passing through the waters, God making the way. Passing through the waters was a sign that the Lord is their salvation and judgment. We saw the same imagery even further back to Noah's day. Noah and his family are spared the judgment of God in a global flood, safe passage through the waters. We saw it when Israel came out of Egypt in Exodus under Moses. The Lord parted the Red Sea, remember, for the people to go through salvation through the waters. Then, of course, when the people came and entered the land under Joshua and passed through the Jordan River where John is baptizing, we read in Joshua 3:13, "When the soles of the feet of the priests who carry the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan will be cut off, and the waters which are flowing down from above will stand in one heap." In other words, there was another Exodus-like event. The waters separate so the people can pass through, salvation through the waters symbolized again.

So even in the act of entering the promised land, this powerful symbolic visualization of salvation was played out before the people. It's an eschatological sign. God parts the way through the waters that His people might come to rest in the place that He has prepared for them. It's a sign ultimately of the new creation to come, and John is reacting out all of this before us as he baptizes the people, immerses them in the waters, and sends them back into the land as consecrated for God. They are now prepared for the coming of the Messiah and His kingdom with him. And really, there's application here for us, isn't there? Before we can enter God's land, the new creation, we must be washed, spiritually that is, through God's grace but evidenced in our repentance for sins and faith in Christ.

And so it's the same message really for us. It is those who have been cleansed, those who have been washed and purified by God who alone may enter the kingdom of heaven. So John calls us to repent of our sin before God. Not that it is repentance that saves us. As another has said, even our repentance needs repenting of. For it's always incomplete, you see,

repentance isn't a work to be saved; we're saved by God's grace. Repentance is the fruit of something that God is doing, but the call still goes out through the call God is working. With this promise, consider 1 John 1:8-9, "If we say we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Praise God.

A second heading is this: rebuking the presumptuous. Have a look again with me at chapter 3, verses 7 to 10. The presumptuous here are the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and they come to John with all the people, and whether they're coming just to see what's going on or whether to actually be baptized themselves is not exactly clear. What is clear is that John scolds them and refers to them as snakes. We see again, "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming out for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'" And the original text in no way definitively shows that they were coming for baptism; rather, the meaning seems to be they were coming to where he was baptizing. It's a little bit unclear. But these were representatives of the Jewish Sanhedrin, the ruling class among the Jews. They came to see what was going on, to see what was causing all of this disturbance in the land. Why are the people traveling to a remote part of the land?

And so John's rebuke is a questioning of their motives. You see, they're not here to repent themselves. And from what we know about the Pharisees in particular, they would think themselves beyond repentance. Repentance was for Gentiles. Repentance was for the unclean, not for people like them. Pharisee means "separate one" or "set apart." Pharisees were some of the most religious of all the Jews. They considered themselves zealous for the things of God, the law, Jewish customs, even those of their own creation. They were generally well respected among ordinary Jews. And the religious life of the nation, in a way, circled around the Pharisees, and some of those were scribes and the Sadducees ruling class as well. But there was an inner decay in the Pharisaic teaching. Tremendous hypocrisy. Their righteousness was a self-righteousness, which is no righteousness.

Listen to the words of Jesus in Matthew 23. Speaking of the Pharisees, He says, "They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders. In other words, they created their own law that was elevated to the place of scripture.

But they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men, for they broaden their phylacteries, the little boxes they wear on their forehead, scriptures on them, and lengthen the tassels of their garments. They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the marketplace and being called rabbi by men." So it's self-righteousness, and Christ condemns them. The Jewish nation, led by such, they're in a bad way. Few were the number who walked by the faith of Abraham. Many were those who, like the Pharisees, pursued God by their merit and works.

And so when John says in verse 8 that they, like everyone else, must bear fruit for God in keeping with repentance, it would have hit them like a ton of bricks. It would have been like an arrow through their soul. We need repentance? The presumption of the Pharisees is clear in what John the Baptist says next. Look again at verse 9. "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 to Abraham." So John is anticipating their response. "We're descendants of Abraham." As if that was something that could get them out of needing to repent. "No harm could come to us. We're God's chosen. We're the chosen nation. We're its representatives. We're all good." How wrong they were.

Think of Paul in Romans, who deals with this issue in a profound way. Romans 3:28, "For we maintain," says Paul, "that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Or is God the God of the Jews only? Is He not the God of the Gentiles also? Of Gentiles also, since indeed God, who will justify the circumcised, that is the Jew, by faith and the uncircumcised, the Gentile, through faith is one." You see, we're all the same. A works-based righteousness cannot save. Biological salvation, being connected as a blood descendant of Abraham, that's not going to help you, John says, Paul says. Man earning his way to God cannot save, and it's never been this way. The only way anyone from Adam until the return of Jesus is going to be saved is through the merits of Jesus Christ, His righteousness, His death on the cross.

And then John gives a warning of unbelief. Look at the next verse. He says in verse 10, "The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." What a powerful imagery. The axe is sitting already at the root of the tree, and the

Lord is looking to see where there'll be fruit on this tree, the fruit of repentance and faith. You see, sin is either paid for by Christ on the cross, or it's paid for by the sinner in eternal judgment. There are two options. Hebrews 9:27 says, "And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once, and after this comes judgment."

So let's question ourselves here. Where do we sit in relation to these things? We must test ourselves to see whether we are in the faith and in Christ and not self-deceived. Assess what is the foundation of your confidence for your salvation. Some might find that their faith was really a second-hand faith. So your parents were outstanding Christians, and somehow you think that will cover you as well. Well, that would be to commit the sin of the Pharisees. "We have Abraham for our father." Some of you come from godly lineage; don't take that for granted. Some might look at their baptism as an infant and find security of salvation in it. This again commits the sin of presumption. Infant baptism is a sign of the promise of faith. It's pointing to God's promise that through faith alone, all who believe apart from works may be named as a child of God.

Others perhaps see their affiliation with a denomination as the mark of their place in the kingdom of God. When we would find the spirit of the Pharisees in such a presumption, you've all experienced this before. You're talking to someone, and you say, "Are you a Christian?" And they respond, "Yes, I'm a member at such and such a Presbyterian church." When was the last time you went? "I never go there, but I'm affiliated." No, friends, that will not do. It must be Christ upon which you rest your soul. It must be His cross that is your surety of divine forgiveness and standing in righteousness before Him. Not your heritage, not your family, not your baptism, not your affiliation with any church, but your standing in the gospel of Jesus Christ. That's all that counts in the end.

We have a third and final heading: revealing the Redeemer. Verses 11 to 12, John is not done yet. So now we really see why John is called the forerunner to Christ. And here he humbly places himself beneath Christ, yielding entirely to Him. You'll see in verse 11 that he says, "I am not fit to remove His sandals." So great is the power and authority of the coming Messiah. So here is coming the one who is promised. Here is coming the one whom all the faithful of all time died in hope that at the right time he would come as the

mighty deliverer. The saints of old died, trusting that God would make good on His word that Christ would come. And now John says he is here. He is announcing the dawn of an entirely new epoch, a new age.

You notice here that John says that Christ is coming and He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. You need to understand that in the Old Testament, the promise of the coming Messiah is wrapped up with the concept of God pouring out His Spirit upon mankind. Of course, this comes to ultimate fulfillment in Acts chapter two, the day of Pentecost. But an incredible work of redemption was about to break out. Hearts will be regenerated, sin and guilt removed from the people, and people will come to know and worship the Creator in a new and vital way. A key text here is Isaiah 44, which connects the coming of the servant of the Lord with the pouring out of the Spirit. Isaiah 44:3, "For I will pour out water on a thirsty land and streams on the dry ground. I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring and my blessing on your descendants, and they will spring up among the grass like poplars by streams of water. This one will say, 'I am the Lord's,' and that one will call on the name of Jacob, and another will write on his hand, 'Belonging to the Lord,' and will name Israel's name with honor."

I want you to notice here how John says that the Lord Jesus was going to come and baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. What does he mean here by fire? This has been the crux of many Bible students. What does John mean here? It's unexplained; he just drops it in. The other gospels don't use it. What's he saying here? This unexplained reference to fire I think is referring to the work of the Spirit of God in people's lives, and a comparison is set up between verse 11 and 12, where fire in verse 11 is of the purification of the Lord's people, but in verse 12, the use of fire is that of divine judgment. Fire has this two-fold ability, doesn't it? The Bible uses fire in the sense of spiritual purification, like in Zechariah 13:9, "I will bring the third part through fire, refine them as silver is refined and test them as gold is tested. They will call on my name, and I will answer them; I will say, 'They are my people.' They will say, 'The Lord is my God.'" And yet flip that coin over, and on the other side, we have fire used symbolically of judgment, through 2 Peter 3:7, "By His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment," you know the text.



What do you make of the Lord's judgment, friend? Have you taken time to process the reality of eternal judgment of unquenchable fire that awaits the unsaved? How do you process the words of John, where he distinguishes here only two categories of people, the saved and the lost? There are some who are going to be baptized in the Holy Spirit in Christ, that is to say they are going to be regenerated and have the works of Christ, the work of Christ applied to them and poured out into their souls. But there are not everyone who receives this, for as in verse 12, His wheat He will gather, but He will burn up the chaff, humanity divided into two groups. These are hard truths.

I encourage you to consider the word of God afresh. I encourage you to learn in the Bible just how putrid and vile sin is to our Creator God. Just how violently opposed He is to all unrighteousness, how holy and separate God is from all that is in the heart of man, the defiance in our hands, the detest in our minds for His ways. We need to be sure that Christ's winnowing fork of judgment is in His hand, and He shall soon come. The 18th-century American preacher Jonathan Edwards, and we close on this, he preached a sermon called "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," a very well-known sermon. The Lord blessed it tremendously. He preached it from Deuteronomy 32:35, a text which says, "Vengeance is mine in retribution. In due time their foot will slip, for the day of their calamity is near, and the impending things are hastening upon them."

Jonathan Edwards pleaded with the congregation from these verses saying, "O sinner, consider the fearful danger you are in. It is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of a God whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it and burn it asunder. And you have no interest in any mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save you, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you have ever done, nothing you can do to induce God to spare you one moment."

Brothers and sisters, you have only these words to fear if there is no repentance or faith for Christ in your heart. God's hand of mercy is extended. Yes, we hang like threads upon the fires of eternal judgment, but Christ is a mighty deliverer to pluck us from beneath, to pluck us from judgment and to

save us. Trust in Christ today for salvation, for to save you, He underwent that very judgment that awaits the sinner in the eternity of hell. He bore in His body our sins while He hung on that tree. He made atonement; He is your escape. You must cling to Him, for there is no other, no other mediator by which you can be saved. Such is the love of God in Christ Jesus, that He would undergo the judgment in our place. Such was the willingness of Jesus to be your ransom. This is the preaching, the ministry of John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Christ.

Let's pray.