“REPENT, FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN HAS COME NEAR”

Matthew 3:1–17

Key Verse: 3:2

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

Preparations are a necessary part of life. Couples prepare for their wedding day. Parents prepare for when their new baby comes home. Students prepare for an upcoming test. Musicians prepare for a concert. Chefs prepare to cook a meal. The preparations are always crucial to success. Matthew 3:1–4:16 is a case in point. Before Jesus begins his ministry, preparations need to be made. John the Baptist prepares the way (3:1–12). Jesus himself also prepares by being baptized by John (3:13–17), resisting the devil’s temptations (4:1–11) and going to the place where God wanted him to be (4:12–16). Just as spiritual preparations were necessary for Jesus, so they are for all of us who want to follow and serve him. But what are “spiritual preparations”? What does it mean to be “prepared spiritually”? In this study we mainly want to think about John’s message, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” It’s the key to spiritual preparation. May God speak to us through his living word today.

Look at verse 1. Here Matthew introduces us to John the Baptist. In fact, throughout this Gospel Matthew draws parallels between John the Baptist and Jesus. Just as John the Baptist “came” (1a), so in verse 13 Matthew writes, “Then Jesus came…” The repeated verb “came” strongly suggests that God sent them both (cf. Jn1:6,14). Both John the Baptist and Jesus came with the same authority of heaven (21:23–32). Both men were recognized by the people as prophets (11:9; 14:5; 21:11,26,46). Both men proclaimed the same message (3:2; 4:17). Both challenged the people to repent. Both were opposed by the religious leaders. In the end, both of them were executed (14:1–12; 26–27). Matthew especially tells us that John the Baptist began the days of the kingdom of heaven (11:11–15), ushering in a new era of God’s salvation history.

And though he parallels both men, Matthew characterizes John the Baptist as quite different from Jesus. John’s point was not himself, but to get people ready for Jesus, to turn people’s attention to Jesus (11). In fact, Matthew depicts John the Baptist as “under” Jesus, totally subordinate to Jesus (11,14).

John the Baptist is called the forerunner of Jesus. What did it mean to be his forerunner? Read verse 3. As we’ve seen, Matthew repeatedly shows us how Old Testament prophecies were being fulfilled. It was true not only of Jesus but also of John. But Isaiah 40:3 also sheds light on what it meant to be a forerunner of Jesus. It says, “Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.” How did John do this? First of all, verses 1 and 3 both mention the wilderness. John began by preaching in the wilderness of Judea. That’s kind of a weird place to start. One would think he would go to where people were. But John went where there were no people, the wilderness. Obviously, he expected people to come out to him. Why did he start preaching in the wilderness? Partly, it was to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah. But by staying in the wilderness John was making a statement. He was taking a stance against a comfortable, self-absorbed lifestyle. The wilderness was a place to get serious about seeking God. It was a place where there were no distractions, where a person could focus on listening to the voice of God. John chose the wilderness, to call people to come out from being absorbed by the world. It might seem that nobody would bother to go see a seemingly crazy man out in the wilderness. But verse 5 tells us that people went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. God was using John in the wilderness to call people back to himself. In a sense, ministry always begins in a spiritual “wilderness”—a place where there’s no awareness of God, no spiritual life. To begin in such a place always takes faith.

What exactly was John telling people? Read verse 2. Why didn’t he just say, “The Messiah is coming”? Why is he using the expression, “The kingdom of heaven has come near”? For a long time, to most people God seemed far away. God didn’t seem very real. Many probably thought that if God did exist, he had totally checked out and abandoned this world. He had even allowed a crazy man like Herod to rule and terrorize his people. Honestly, the world didn’t look like the kingdom of heaven, but kind of like a living hell. But now, John is saying, God has intervened in human history. God has started bringing his kingdom, his rule, into the realm of where human beings live. God has been doing it quietly, right in their midst, though they were unaware of it. God was bringing his kingdom near through the coming of Jesus. People need the eyes of faith to see it.

In this one person, Jesus, God’s kingdom has come near. But how so? Jesus came to give people real access to God. Jesus offers us all God’s grace of forgiveness of sins. This grace of God brings us spiritual healing. Through Jesus, no matter now sinful we are, we can draw near to God and experience his amazing grace. Fundamentally, living in the kingdom of heaven means living in his grace. His grace becomes our hope. His grace enables us to see the world, ourselves, and others with hope. His grace enables us to live differently, not as negative, cruel, vicious people, using and hurting each other, but as transformed people, gracious members of his kingdom, people full of God’s love, peace and forgiveness. Ultimately, his grace is an invitation to come back home to be with him forever. Jesus not only would die for our sins but also would be raised from the dead to give us a living hope in heaven (1Pe1:3,4). One day he’ll come back to this world and bring his kingdom fully (25:34). In light of this hope, we should live wisely, waiting for his kingdom (25:1–13).

John the Baptist’s brief message “the kingdom of heaven has come near” describes so well why Jesus came. This kingdom coming is exciting. John said it “has come near.” Hearing about it is actually the chance of a lifetime. It’s like a train pulling into the station opening its doors: We shouldn’t just stand there, but walk through the doors and get on before the doors close and the train leaves. Paul describes it like this: “As God’s co-workers we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain. For he says, ‘In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.’ I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation” (2Co6:1,2). Though it’s simple, it’s a very urgent message.

How should we respond? John gave one clear, simple word: “Repent.” Don’t just think about it; repent! What does it mean? For some, repentance conjures up images of self-torture or of getting really emotional. But it’s not about just getting emotional or torturing ourselves. In this context, to repent means to stop being engrossed in the things of this world, to stop ignoring God. The word “repent” literally means to “change your mind.” It especially means to come to God personally, asking him to forgive us, asking him to be in a real relationship with him. And it means to get rid of whatever in our lives may be hindering us from having that relationship. Later in verse 6 it mentions that people were “confessing their sins.” They were admitting the wrongs they’d done and asking God’s forgiveness. To repent means to have a godly sorrow over our sins (2Co7:10). In a sense, it means to apologize to God. It means stop rationalizing, making excuses, blaming our situation or others, stop living in denial, humble ourselves, own our sin and take responsibility for it. To repent isn’t a mind game or intellectual exercise; it means taking drastic action. James 4:8 says, “Come near to God, and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” When we repent, we start seeing sin the way God does. Instead of loving it, we start to hate it. It’s not a once-in-a-lifetime thing; it's a lifestyle. To repent means to keep struggling against our sins and coming to God for forgiveness, no matter how often we may fail (18:21ff.).

John’s message, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” means this good news is available and accessible to anyone. It’s a message of great hope, even for the most sinful people. John prepared people for Jesus by giving them this message. As John prepared the way for Jesus, we’re called to do the same (Mk6:12).

Read verse 4. It tells us he was just like the prophet Elijah (2Ki1:8). He used whatever was available to him out in the wilderness. But he wore such humble clothes and ate such humble food not to make himself more righteous than others, but to focus on God’s mission for him, to prepare the way for Jesus. In our self-absorbed culture John the Baptist is such a breath of fresh air.

How did people respond to him? Read verses 5,6. John was out in the wilderness. He was living poorly. His message was simple and very challenging. But people loved it. They responded in droves. It’s because John’s lifestyle gave his message spiritual power. If we want to influence people, it can’t be just through our words; it's got to be through how we live in our daily lives. How we live has to match what we teach.

John had a very different message for the religious leaders. Read verses 7–10. With great courage John severely rebuked them. He was mainly rebuking them for their pride. They thought they were already good with God because of their heritage. They were badly mistaken. Because of their unrepentant hearts they were actually under God’s wrath and judgment. These religious leaders knew the Scriptures and were faithful to rituals, but it was all a bunch of hypocrisy; it was actually all for their own glory and honor (23:1ff.). We learn here that real repentance produces fruit. What is this fruit? First of all, in light of John’s rebuke it’s got to be the fruit of humility. It’s also the fruit of real love for God, expressed in real love for our fellow human beings (Isa58:6,7). Read verses 11,12. Here John turns the attention away from himself to Jesus. He is serving Jesus not as if he’s doing everyone a great favor, but with a deep awareness of his own unworthiness. And he really wants people to experience the permanent change Jesus brings. Water washes away dirt temporarily. But the Holy Spirit brings about real inner change. Jesus baptizes us with the Holy Spirit, to burn away our sinful desires and make our love for God real. Jesus is the judge who one day will sort the repentant from the unrepentant.

In the last part of chapter 3 we see Jesus coming to John to be baptized. It shows his humility to co-work with John the Baptist. He didn’t need John’s baptism, because he was without sin. But he did so to acknowledge God’s work through John’s ministry. Jesus didn’t start his ministry as a one-man show, but with humble co-working. It also shows his obedience to God. Going to John to be baptized meant accepting God’s mission for him. When Jesus submitted himself to God like this, God was so pleased. Read verse 17. This became the key verse of Jesus. Jesus would face such harsh criticism and rejection. He needed this personal word from God assuring him of the Father’s love for him. Being sure of God’s personal love may be the best spiritual preparation for ministry.

Today we mainly thought about John’s message, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” May God bless each of us to really accept this message and produce the spiritual fruit in our lives that God is looking for.