

Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand  
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**Bible Text:** Matthew 3:1-12  
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Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight.'"

And John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 3:1-12.

God has always led his people by His Word and today we have the privilege of having Him to do that again as we consider John the Baptist. You have an outline in front of you where you will see an explanation of the ministry of John the Baptist under the following headings:

- I. The Man, v1,4
- II. The Mission, v3
- III. The message, v2-12
- V. The response, v5-10
- IV. The Symbol, v11
- V. The motivation, v12

As we come to John the Baptist, we find him standing at the cross roads of the Old and then New Testaments. He is bringing a message that is common to the law, to all the prophets, to Jesus, to the apostles and the Church. That message is, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."<sup>2</sup>

When we encounter John and his message, we have to understand that his message of repentance is at the heart of the Christian life. When Martin Luther nailed the 95 theses on the Wittenberg door, the very first thesis was about repentance. He states that to repent means that the entire life of believers is to be one of repentance. From the time of the fall, God has called human beings to repent.

William Plumber, writing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, says this: "Under all dispensations since our first parents were expelled from the Garden of Eden, God insisted on repentance." Among the patriarchs, Job said, "I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes,"<sup>3</sup> Job 42:6. Under the law, David wrote the 31<sup>st</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> Psalms. John the Baptist cried, "Repent, [ye], for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,"<sup>4</sup> Matthew 3:2. Christ's account of himself is that he came to call sinners to repentance, Matthew 9:13. Just before his ascension Christ commanded that repentance and remission of sins be preached in His name among all nations beginning at Jerusalem, Luke 24:47. The apostles taught the same doctrine to the Jews and to the Greeks, Acts 20:21.

(I acquired part of this from *God's Gospel of Grace*, edited by Jeff Pollard. I highly recommend this book. You can get it from Chapel Library.)

### **The heart of true Christianity is here**

But here in Matthew 3:1-12, John the Baptist announces the transformational, cataclysmic, radical, seismic, tsunamic, changes that true Christianity brings. When God sent John the Baptist out of the wilderness to preach repentance,

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 3:2.

<sup>3</sup> Job 42:6.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 3:2.

there were earthquakes in the souls of those who heard the preaching. People were fleeing the wrath to come. However, some of those who came to hear the preaching were not fleeing, they were faking.

In Isaiah 40:4-5, God Himself likened the changes taking place there to massive geographic upheaval. *“Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth; The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”*

So John is standing guard over the idea that nobody yawns their way into the kingdom of heaven. You can only enter that kingdom through repentance. And, true repentance is likened to a valley being brought up and a hill being taken down and the crooked places made straight - cataclysmic, geographical upheaval.

### **Silence broken**

And the magnitude of the moment here in the wilderness is in many ways super charged because this is the first time in the 400 years since the prophet Malachi that a prophet has spoken. John breaks the silence and he is like the first breach in the dam, the dam of repentance. Then Christ will come and then his apostles will come and then those whom Christ has delegated his work to will be sent to all the earth baptizing, making disciples, and teaching all the things Christ commanded.

### **Prophecies fulfilled**

Matthew is continuing to do what he has been doing in almost every paragraph of the gospel so far. He is saying, “This is that.” For example, when we encounter the virgin birth in Matthew, he makes it plain that this is that which was prophesied in the Old Testament. When Joseph comes out of Egypt, Matthew is saying, “This is that” – “Out of Egypt I have called my Son.” Matthew is continuing to move through this descriptive pattern to establish that what was prophesied in the Old Testament is being fulfilled before his eyes.

So let’s begin with the text.

First we encounter John the Baptist, the man.

#### **I. The Man, v1-4**

And so a new character is breaking on the scene, “In those days John the Baptist came...”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 3:1.

## John's name

I think those are critical words to understand. They introduce a new character into the story that we have not seen before, and his name is John.

I know that there are a number of people here, including two of my children, who are crying out to God to help them understand what to name their children that will be born here in the next few days and months. They are taking such pains because names mean something. This man's name was expressly given by God. John means "*Jehovah is a gracious giver.*" What a beautiful name.

It is such a blessing to be in this church and to witness parents choosing wonderful names that speak of glorious things. This is what John's parents did. Of course, they were under divine order to name him John.

## Timeline of John's life

Notice the timeline of John's life. From chapter two to chapter three we advance in time. We advance from John's infancy to his adulthood and the same with Jesus, as well, marked by the words, "In those days..."<sup>6</sup>

Now in Luke chapter three verse one we learn when this happened, "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee."<sup>7</sup> And so this happens perhaps in 25 or 26 AD or maybe as late as 27 to 29 AD. There is kind of a complicated way of considering how to determine the exact date of John's ministry. But John now is older.

Luke also tells us that John actually grew up in the desert. Luke 1:80 says, "So the child grew and became strong in spirit and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel."<sup>8</sup>

So here is this young man. He is born into his father's house. He is filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb. And here Luke chapter one verse 80 says that he was in the desert, from the time of his childhood. And because he was filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb, we know of the blessedness that must have been life in the desert, a satisfying life is found in the Spirit of God. And so we know that from his youth up that he saw the world through the eyes of the Lord. This is the best way to live.

Children, learn how to live from John the Baptist. How will you be like him? And the secret is found in his spirit. Wherever you happen to grow up, whatever home you are in, the secret of life is that you are filled with the Spirit of God.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 3:1.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 1:80.

Luke 1:13 tells us that the angel Gabriel appeared to John's father and said to him:

Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."<sup>9</sup>

So what a wonderful childhood it must have been in the desert.

### **But what type of ministry was it?**

"In those days John the Baptist came preaching..."<sup>10</sup> So it was a ministry of preaching. And the term here is *kerusso* (kay-roos'-so). It is a common word used in Scripture for this act of heralding or proclaiming the Word of God with authority. And so this is what John was doing. He was preaching.

Most of you here understand how preaching can change your life - how it can completely, cataclysmically change the course of your life. If your heart is open and you are hungry, you will get bread from heaven. Open your mouth and He will feed you. And it was meant for that. It was meant to be a herald. It was meant for authority and for a proclamation of the glory and the goodness of God. And so we will always continue preaching.

And it just doesn't happen in places like this behind this podium. In fact, when Jesus begins his preaching ministry, he begins in a house. So preaching in houses, preaching in deserts, preaching in the public squares, preaching everywhere, that is what John is doing here. It was open air preaching.

I know there are some here who love open air preaching and that is why you have to love John the Baptist here. He is like George Whitefield - with this exception. Whitefield seemed to go where the people were. And most open air preachers go where the people are. John went where the people weren't. Go figure. It was a very different technique. He had no hip hair cut, no coffee shop and no mousse in his hair.

### **The wilderness**

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<sup>9</sup> Luke 1:13-17.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 3:1.

He went out into the wilderness. The wilderness of Judea is about 20 miles away from Jerusalem and the terminology here, it communicates remoteness. It was west of the Dead Sea. Most probably where the Jordan River flowed into the Dead Sea. The wilderness is a place of new beginnings. And when Jeremiah speaks of it he speaks of the youth going out to the desert to seek the Lord. They were holiness to the Lord, he said. I love that imagery in Jeremiah chapter two verses two and three.

In Hosea chapter two verses 14 and 15 we read this. "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, Will bring her into the wilderness, And speak comfort to her."<sup>11</sup>

This is a picture of wayward Israel. The wife has abandoned the love of her youth and is lured into the wilderness so that God would speak words of comfort. That is exactly what John the Baptist was doing. His words of repentance were absolutely words of comfort. There is no comfort without repentance.

In Isaiah 41 we read, "I will plant in the wilderness the cedar."<sup>12</sup>

In Isaiah 35, "The desert shall rejoice."<sup>13</sup>

In Isaiah 32, "The wilderness [will be] a fruitful field."<sup>14</sup>

Well, that is what was happening, though it was like a desert, it was like a garden of the heart there. And so the Word of God came to him in the wilderness.

And it was also, of course, the place where Jesus was tempted. It was a place of trials and privation. It was a depopulated region. And so he was not going for the most strategic location. The ministry of the apostles, however was very different. They did go to the cities.

Now this is significant. Why is this significant that Matthew brings it up? For probably a number of reasons, but one reason I believe is that when men hear this about the wilderness, they are automatically starting to think of the children of Israel in the wilderness, and then how they were brought out of the wilderness into the Promised Land.

### **John's appearance and diet**

We also learn about this appearance and his diet. John was clothed in camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist and his food was locusts and wild honey. You will find that in verse four.

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<sup>11</sup> Hosea 2:14.

<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 41:19.

<sup>13</sup> Isaiah 35:1.

<sup>14</sup> Isaiah 32:15.

And so his clothing was ordained by God. He dressed his part. He did not stand in the front of the wardrobe thinking of how he would so creatively array himself with clothing. He actually clothed himself in order to fulfill Scripture. His clothing was a fulfillment of what God had spoken beforehand. And we are no different. It is not appropriate for us to dress our own way, but for the glory of God. We don't first dress ourselves for success. We don't dress ourselves for allurements, but for the glory of God.

All of our clothing is meant to declare the glory of God. Men and women ought to dress for the express purpose of demonstrating that we have been clothed in righteousness. When man sinned he was unclothed and God clothed him. Clothing has a divinely ordained function. It is meant to declare the glory of the gospel. Your clothing has nothing to do with projecting your image or looking the way you want to look. Your clothing has only one purpose - to declare the glory of God.

And so when you look in that mirror you ought to think, how does this glorify God? How does it point to Christ? How does it point to purity? How does it point to the fact that I am a sinner who has repented and been redeemed?

But John here is wearing this clothing that fit his station in life and his role as a prophet. Some indicate that the language here means that he was extremely hairy – robed in hair. But John's attire was like Elijah as we read in 2 Kings chapter one verse eight.

Further, he came neither eating nor drinking except that he ate insects. The commentator, R. T. France says this. *"This insect was highly prized as nourishment either in water and salt like our prawns or dried in the sun and preserved in honey and vinegar or powdered and mixed with wheat flour into a pancake."*

MMM...Insect pancakes.

These things explain John, the man.

Now, let's turn to his mission.

## **II. The Mission, v3**

John's mission is explained in verse three, "For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight."'"<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Matthew 3:3.

So John's purpose, his mission was to fulfill prophecy, to "Prepare the way of LORD; Make His paths straight."<sup>16</sup> That is his mission is to make paths straight for the Lord.

While this was John's specific mission, this is also our mission as evangelists, as disciple makers. While we do not have the exact mission of John the Baptist because of our unique callings, there is a sense that we are called to do a very similar thing. As we are going out into this world to make disciples of all the nations, we are preparing the way through repentance, through the preaching of the gospel. Isaiah 40 helps us to understand.

Isaiah 40 begins the last division of the book of Isaiah. Isaiah is broken up into two sections. In chapters one through 39 Isaiah is talking about the present judgment and captivity. But in chapter 40 the captivity has already happened and now the message is: God has not forgotten you. He is going to save you. That is the message which is prophetic of the future that is located in chapter 40 and forward. So there are two divisions here and 40 through 66 pictures the coming of the Messiah. But it starts with the gospel. It starts of the voice crying in the wilderness in Isaiah 40 verse three. And it concludes with the new heavens and the new earth in Isaiah 66 verse 22.

So it is in this prophetic section of Isaiah that speaks of the coming of Christ and the gospel.

The heart of the message in this section is that God keeps his promises and he speaks comfort to his people and he gathers them into his barns.

This is also imagery of Malachi chapter three verse one.

"I will send My messenger."<sup>17</sup>

Malachi, the last prophet of the Old Testament, prophesies that Elijah will come. Now, was John the Baptist Elijah himself? No. He wasn't physical Elijah. That would actually be reincarnation. But this is not reincarnation.

2 Kings 2:11 says that Elijah actually went straight to heaven and he is not here on the earth.

But we find imagery here that is also found throughout the book of Malachi. The language is the same in many places.

The theme of Malachi is that God will judge his people and then he will restore them and he will send a prophet, a forerunner. The problem is, the people of Israel have slipped into sin after their return from Babylon. They doubt God's

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Malachi 3:1.



love. They are offering sacrifices, but not offering themselves. They had a form of religion, but no love for God. And God is coming to them in Malachi and saying, "Either repent or be like Edom. I will strike the earth with a curse."

In Malachi chapter one you find the priests who despise God's name and God confronts them. This is exactly what John does in this chapter as well of Matthew.

In Malachi chapter two there are specific sins that Israel has committed. And they are not bringing forth the fruits of repentance and they are divorcing in their idolatry and they are faking their worship by doing the deeds, but having no heart. This is mirrored in the ministry of John the Baptist.

And in chapter three verse one we read, "Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me."<sup>18</sup>

So here the terminology is carried over by Matthew in this chapter. There is the refiner's fire and there is the purifier of silver that is implied here in the language of Matthew chapter three as well.

In chapter four verse one we read in Malachi, "For behold, the day is coming, Burning like an oven, And all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up,' Says the LORD of hosts, 'That will leave them neither root nor branch.'"<sup>19</sup>

This is the same kind of language. The axe is being laid to the tree.

And then in chapter four verses five and six.

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse.<sup>20</sup>

Matthew is saying, "This" (John the Baptist), "is that," (the prophesy in Malachi), "This is that which is prophesied by the prophet Malachi."

### **III. The Message, v2-12**

Now we come to the message of John the Baptist, and here we will linger. The message that John the Baptist presents is, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Malachi 3:1.

<sup>19</sup> Malachi 4:1.

<sup>20</sup> Malachi 4:5-6.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 3:2.

## How do you define repentance?

Notice that John uses a verb metanoew (meta-no-eh'-o) which means to turn and change. In this sense, John has a turning ministry. And in many ways we have that same kind of ministry. Our job is to go out into the world to call for repentance - for turning, because repentance is turning. Most people are turning from either an intentional lifestyle of irreverent God hating wickedness or, religiosity and moral fakery. These are the two kinds of people that were actually out coming to John in the wilderness.

Is repentance, feeling sorry? Is it self condemnation? Is it remorse? Repentance can be described by the experience of walking in a direction. You are walking in one direction and then you start going the opposite direction. Repentance is a radical shift in direction.

In this sense, you don't yawn your way into the kingdom of heaven. You turn around from where you were going, and you run toward God. This is the kind of repentance that John is speaking about here. It is renouncing your former way of life and living a new life.

So it is not an attitude adjustment, but an attitude revolution.

It is not a lifestyle modification, but a complete makeover.

Of course, there are two categories of repentance. First there is the initial repentance of salvation. Then, there is the continual repentance that Martin Luther spoke of that it is just the normal part of the Christian life.

So we must define repentance accurately. Repentance is a radical seismic transformation just like Isaiah said, "Every valley shall be exalted And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight."<sup>22</sup>

True repentance is like an earthquake of the soul that changes the configuration of your life. And it is like the restructuring of the earth happens when the hills are brought down and the valleys are raised up. This is the radical restructuring of life that is true Christianity.

We recently were horrified by the news about that gigantic earthquake in Japan. The coastline of Japan moved 13 feet and it tilted the earth's axis by 10 inches. The earth changed in the same way that Isaiah 40 explains – the hills were brought low and the valleys raised. Several years ago there was another gigantic earthquake in Chile. The entire city of Concepcion moved 10 feet to the west and the capital city, Santiago moved as well. So this kind of geographical revolution is part of the picture of repentance.

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<sup>22</sup> Isaiah 40:4.

Why do earthquakes happen? They happen because the tectonic plates are pressing up against one another, creating tension. They press and they grind against one another and then they slip and the earth changes. What happened in Japan is that out in the ocean, tectonic plates were pressing against each other and they started to slip and then finally, wham, they slipped creating the gigantic tsunami that washed 28,000 lives away into eternity.

Well, that is the kind of imagery that Isaiah is presenting in Isaiah 40:4. This was the kind of repentance that was happening in the wilderness.

And so I am praying for us that we are not yawning our way to heaven, but that we are a repenting people who cry out to God that He would show us how we ought to repent.

What you do with your eyes, what you do with your time, what you do with the meditations of your heart, what you do with your relationships, what you do with your clothing, what you do with your car, what you do with your house, what you do with your money. That is what John is talking about here. This is the stuff of the Christian life. This is true Christianity.

And in this room here today there are those who aren't converted. I pray that you would feel the tension. Maybe this would be the day when the tension in your soul will rise to such a degree that you make a dramatic shift and you change and it is like an earthquake of the soul where the whole landscape of your life is transformed.

### **Examples of repentance**

And there are so many examples of this in the parallel narrative in Luke. If you go to Luke chapter three you find more detail about this because different kind of people are coming to John and saying, "What should we do?"

That is the question. How will my valley be raised up? How will my hill be taken down? How will my way be made straight because it is so crooked?

The people were coming to John saying, "What do we do, John?"

And in Luke three verse 10, first of all, the people came. The people came and they said, "What shall we do, then?"<sup>23</sup>

And he answered and said to them, "He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Luke 3:10.

<sup>24</sup> Luke 3:11.

This was a mixture of the general populous. And John was saying, "Give out of the abundance that God has given you."

But I think Calvin rightly says that John is not saying it is illegal to own two coats. That is not the point. The point is that whatever you have should be placed into service of the King. You should give out of the abundance of what God has given you, whatever he has given you. Maybe all you have is the clothing on your back - therefore glorify God with it.

No one can stand before God and say, "I don't know what to do," because He has given us everything - every moment, every breath, every possession, every opportunity is meant for the glory of God.

So the people said, "What do we do?"

And then the tax gatherers came in verses 12 and 13 and they said... they came to be baptized. And they said, "Teacher, what shall we do?"<sup>25</sup>

And he said, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you."<sup>26</sup>

In other words, don't be greedy. Glorify God in your work of collecting of taxes.

And then the soldiers came in verse 14 and they said, "And what shall we do?"<sup>27</sup>

And so he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages."<sup>28</sup>

So these are the earthquakes of the soul, that come from the pressure points that are building in people's lives. At some point there is a breaking point, a metaneo, a restructuring of life. These changes all come from the question, "What do I do with the things that God has given me?" The answer is, repent and let the landscape change. You may ask, "What do I do with my job?" Repent; let the landscape of your labors change. You may ask, "What do I do with my family?" Repent; let the landscape of your family change. You may ask, "What do I do with my church?" Repent; let the landscape of your church life change.

There is such urgency here in this text. It is now or it is never. We find the same message out of the mouths of Jesus and the apostles and that the Church is to bring into the world: repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Luke 3:12.

<sup>26</sup> Luke 3:13.

<sup>27</sup> Luke 3:14.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Matthew 3:2.

There is always an ongoing need for repentance. No one enters the kingdom of heaven without repentance.

When we interview people for Church membership here at Hope, we always ask them, "Could you please explain the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ?"

Sometimes people leave out repentance in their explanation. This represents a defective understanding of the gospel. But, this is a very critical aspect of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Need for ongoing repentance**

But there is an ongoing need for repentance and that is why when Paul is addressing the elders of the Ephesian Church in Acts chapter 20 verse 21, he reminds them that when he was with them, he was always testifying repentance toward God and faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ.

I have been thinking about repentance in our own church and I was just recounting the many people who are repenting of their former ways of life here. Some repenting, entering in the kingdom of heaven and then many others after having done that, repenting of dead works, and of the things they did not even know were sin ten years ago. God is convicting them in their hearts. We have seen astonishing, earthshaking, seismic shifts in people's lives.

And, brothers and sisters, that is the way it ought to be. That is true Christianity. Preaching without repentance is not biblical preaching.

You read about this kind of repentance in the Corinthian Church. We are like Corinth, brothers and sisters. Let's not think that we are so different than Corinth.

The apostle Paul was speaking to them and he said, "The unrighteous cannot enter the kingdom of heaven."

Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.<sup>30</sup>

Brothers and sisters, let's continue the work of repentance. Let's don't yawn our way into glory, but let's seek the areas that God would have us repent and be a repenting church.

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<sup>30</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.

Luke 15 says that, “There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”<sup>31</sup>

### **Why is repentance necessary?**

It is because there is no one who does good. There is no one living righteous, so says the psalmist in Psalm 143.

Proverbs 20 verse nine says, “Who can say, ‘I have made my heart clean?’”<sup>32</sup> If the Lord would mark our iniquities we could not stand, because they are so great.

### **How is repentance possible?**

It is only possible one way. No one can repent unless the Spirit of God allows him to repent. In the confession of our church, the Second London Baptist Confession we read, “Saving repentance is an evangelical grace.” In other words, it is something that God grants. A person being led by the Holy Spirit is “made sensible of the manifold evils of his sin does by faith in Christ humble himself for it with godly sorrow, detestation of it and self abhorrency, praying for pardon and strength of grace.”

This is a work of the Spirit of God. No one can repent unless God helps him to repent. That is why in Zechariah we read, “I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn.”<sup>33</sup>

Here is Zechariah is saying is that true repentance is like grieving for the death of your first born son. Now compare yourselves with that, brothers and sisters, as I compare my own self with it.

Do you grieve for your sin the way you would grieve if your own son had died?

### **Confessing particular sins**

It is also important to point out the specific nature of repentance, that it is our duty to repent of known sins, which brings us into a lifetime of repentance.

Again, our confession says, “As repentance is to be continued through the whole course of our lives, so it is in every man’s duty to repent of his particular known sins particularly.”

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<sup>31</sup> Luke 15:10.

<sup>32</sup> Proverbs 20:9.

<sup>33</sup> Zechariah 12:10.

In other words, it is faking when we are so general in our repentance. But there are particular sins that need to be repented of particularly, to name them. It is so much easier to say something general when actually there is a poison that has a name. And it should be named in repentance.

I would like to give you some wisdom from Thomas Watson on the whole matter of repentance. Thomas Watson gives six ingredients of repentance.

Thomas Watson defines repentance like this,

“Repentance is a grace of God’s Spirit whereby a sinner is inwardly humbled and visibly reformed.”

That is a really good definition.

### **Ingredient number one, sight of sin.**

The prodigal son came to himself. He saw that sin was a plague. It is an enemy. If you can’t see your sin, you cannot repent. Thomas Watson likens this as a falconer who takes a hawk and puts blinders on him. Have you ever seen that? And he says that this is like the devil who blinds his children and takes them to hell. If you can’t see them, you can’t repent. So pray for illumination that you would be able to see your sins. That is the first ingredient, sight of sin.

**The second ingredient is sorrow for sin.** “They will look on Me whom they pierced.”<sup>34</sup>

This is inward sorrow, genuine sorrow. It is mixed with faith. It is great sorrow joined with restitution. It is abiding. He likens it to the imposter that is like dew falling on a leaf, but it doesn’t soak into the root. So there is sorrow for sin.

**The third ingredient is confession of sin.** True confession particularizes sin.

**The fourth ingredient, shame for sin.** When the heart has been made black with sin, grace makes the face red with blushing. Watson quotes Ezra 9:6, “I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face.”<sup>35</sup>

**The fifth ingredient is hatred of sin.** Ezekiel 36:31 says, “[You] shall loathe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities.”<sup>36</sup> This is the heart set against all forms of sin.

**The sixth ingredient, turning from sin.** Isaiah 55:7 explains this kind of forsaking sin of the eyes, of the ears, of the feet and of the heart.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ezra 9:6.

<sup>36</sup> Ezekiel 36:31.

John Gill says, "It is not just the grosser sins, but the lesser ones that need to be repented of, not only of public, but private sins are to be repented of, sins both of commission and omission should be repented of, sins that are committed in the most solemn and serious and holy performances of God's people should be repented of, the sins of daily life."

Gill also says that it is not only the actual sins and transgressions, but also sins in thought should be repented of and even of indwelling sin and original sin.

So repentance has particular ways about it. And then from John we learn why.

**Why should we repent?** And the answer is: The kingdom of heaven is at hand.

We repent because of kingdoms. We repent because there are rulers. There is the kingdom of God and there is the kingdom of the devil. We repent to serve a different king.

He says the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Not only are you choosing kings when you repent, but there is a reality that John is saying the kingdom of heaven is at hand. And what John means is that when the gospel is preached, when Jesus Christ's power, when kingship is expressed on the earth, the kingdom has come. But it also means the kingdom that will come at a future time. The kingdom is actually two things. It exists in the heart and it exists forever in all of eternity.

And so what is happening here is the people are coming out of the wilderness and they are changed. They are like a coastline of Japan. The whole geography has been altered. Like that coastline, the shoreline of their lives has moved 10 feet. Their valleys have come up and their hills are being pressed down and they are coming out of the wilderness differently.

**What about people who never change?**

Perhaps there are people you have known and they never change. They walk down an aisle, pray a prayer and make a confession of faith. And the hills of their lives are just like the old hills and the valleys are just like the old valleys.

Brothers and sisters, this is a sign that there is no true repentance, because true repentance is cataclysmic. It is seismic, it is tsunamic. It makes a difference. It changes things.

That is why the apostle Paul said, "Let your progress be evident to all."

And then we read of the response in verses five through 10.



## V. The Response, 5-10

First of all there is the geographical scale of the response for “Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him.”<sup>37</sup> The people are flocking in from a fairly wide region. They are being baptized in the Jordan River. And what kind of baptism is this?

John was baptizing in a deep river that had been flowing for thousands of years. We could talk about Jewish proselyte baptism and all kinds of other things. But what we understand here is that John was baptizing these people. This was a picture or a type of the baptism that Jesus would commission his disciples to perform in Matthew chapter 28. Jesus said, “Go into all the world and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

So what is happening here is a prefigurement of what will be commissioned. Many of the meanings are the same, but there is something different happening here. This baptism is different than Jesus’ baptism and it is different than the coming baptism.

And then notice the confrontation in verses seven through 10.

“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, ‘Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’”<sup>38</sup>

And so John here is picturing snakes slithering out of a fire to try to get away from the wrath to come. And John is confronting fakers here, those who are just coming out. He is confronting those with no fruit. He says, “‘Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance.’”<sup>39</sup>

He is really articulating the doctrine of salvation, that repentance always issues in fruitbearing. Thankfully, God does not cut us off for our early fruits. He continues to work to help us to bear fruit in all of our lives.

He is confronting them of having no faith. They are saying to themselves, “We have Abraham as our father.”<sup>40</sup> And John says, “For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.”<sup>41</sup>

Instead of having faith, they were trusting in family. They were trusting in their traditions. They did not have real genuine saving faith. And John is saying the stones are more likely to become followers of God than are the Jews.

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<sup>37</sup> Matthew 3:5.

<sup>38</sup> Matthew 3:7.

<sup>39</sup> Matthew 3:8.

<sup>40</sup> Matthew 3:9.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

That is why Matthew Henry says, “Don’t rock yourselves to sleep with this or flatter yourselves into a fool’s paradise” thinking that because you have a father who is godly that you can be godly or you have some kind of heritage or tradition. The only thing that saves is faith, faith and repentance.

And then John speaks of the coming judgment in verse 10.

“And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”<sup>42</sup>

It is cut down. There is a finality. Some of you have been aware of a recent book that has received lots of press, Rob Bell’s book *Love Wins*. When it says here, “Every tree is cut down and thrown into the fire,” the book is deconstructed because it is final judgment that he is speaking of.

And then there is the symbol of this repentance in verse 11.

## **VI. The Symbol, v11**

“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”<sup>43</sup>

So there are two baptisms here. There is water baptism and there is spirit baptism here. John’s baptism is an outward sign of an inward reality. But Spirit baptism comes from an infilling of the Holy Spirit. It is being raised up with Christ who is our life. This is an infusion of spiritual life that he is speaking of.

This marks the difference between Old Testament and New Testament saints. New Testament saints are filled with the Spirit while the Old Testament saints were often endowed with power by the Holy Spirit. And that marks a line of distinction. In the New Covenant, there is extra help from heaven that God gives us. When sin’s power is broken by the Holy Spirit it means that you have an enabling that you never had before. You have an enabling that Old Testament saints did not have in the same way, because you have been actually baptized by the Spirit.

I believe it was Dan Horn on Tuesday morning said, “In this way you can’t always just look at the Old Testament saints and say, ‘Look how bad they were. Isn’t that ok that I am just like them?’” We should not say that because they had a different endowment of power. They were different. There is a new covenant and there is an old covenant. And God is pouring out his grace upon his Church. He is giving

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<sup>42</sup> Matthew 3:10.

<sup>43</sup> Matthew 3:11.

us more help inwardly in a way that Old Testament saints did not have. This is the baptism of the Spirit and of fire.

This is fire that purifies like gold is purified. This is progressive sanctification.

And then there is the motivation in verse 12.

## **V. The motivation, v12**

“His winnowing fan is in his hand.”<sup>44</sup>

This is why we should all repent.

“He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”<sup>45</sup>

Now the threshing floor is the visible Church. And God is cleaning up his Church. He is separating the wheat from the chaff. There are two kinds of people here. There is the chaff that will be burned up with unquenchable fire. These are under God’s wrath and condemnation and they will be subjected to everlasting damnation unless they repent. And then there is the wheat that is brought into the barn. God brings his children into his barn. He takes the wheat and brings it safely home.

I am sure you have heard the term, “like a horse going to the barn.” A horse wants to go to the barn because there is food there. That is where he is taken care of. That is where there is shelter. It is a wonderful place. The barn is a place of refuge and blessing. Maybe someday all of us will have the opportunity to actually live in a barn, God’s barn. This heavenly barn contains all of the wheat. It is the place where all those who are hungry, want to go and find shelter from storms. That is the kind of barn God has for us.

This passage ends with unquenchable fire on the one hand, but also a barn with God’s children being gathered into one of his dwelling places that he has been preparing for them.

That is why the Lord Jesus said, “Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many [dwelling places].”<sup>46</sup>

And so we have considered the man, the voice sent from God; the mission, to prepare the way; the message, to repent; the response, both confession and fakery; the symbol, baptism; and the motivation, a barn or unquenchable fire.

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<sup>44</sup> Matthew 3:12.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> John 14:1-2.

And I will leave you with two thoughts. The first has to do with the intensity of our repentance, the intensity of the activity that we invest in repentance. There is something that seismologists call “induced seismicity.” This is seismicity, or susceptibility to move, that has been induced. It is brought about by something. And the term is used to speak of things that may increase earthquake activity and earthquakes. For example, more earthquakes happen where there has been drilling or excavating. One example would be a mine where billions of tons of rock have been removed. It changes the way the plates are interacting with one another. And it can happen with storing large amounts of water behind a dam and then changing the way the plates are operating together. It increases the odds of an earthquake.

And so I want us to consider the intensity of our activity in this business of repentance to increase our seismicity in a ways to increase the change, to increase the rate of change of the hill of your life that has been sticking out there forever in your marriage, with your children, that hill of sin that needs to be pushed down, that valley, that depth of... maybe it is despair. Maybe it is something that you just fall into all the time. It is the pit in which you fall. Increase the seismicity so that the activity of repentance increases so that the hills are made lower and the valleys are brought up, so that we are not falling into the same pits over and over again.

And, again, who is fit for this? Only the Spirit of God can help us to do that. Let’s be a people crying out for help from the Spirit of God.

And with this incomprehensible interchange of man’s will and God’s sovereignty, we engage this. We do whatever we can to repent. We confess our sins to one another in the Church. We confess of our sins particularly with specificity. That is what increases the seismicity in the human heart and in the church like ours.

Here we are and let’s not yawn our way to our heavenly home, that wonderful barn that God has for us.

And so that is the first thought. How can we in our hearts before God with sincerity and truth cry out for a mighty work of the Spirit of God to bring down every hill and bring every valley up in our lives?

Now I look forward to the days when we will just see more of this. The tension builds and you can take it no more and finally, bam, you slip and everything is changed. There will be so much more of that in our church. I know it. What a blessing it will be to live out the years of life here.

When we were going through the book of Deuteronomy there was induced seismicity. We read things that were very disturbing about ourselves. That is induced seismicity. Seismicity is induced by a work of the Holy Spirit by the Word of God. But it takes a heart for it as well. So that is the first thing.

The second thing I wanted to leave you with and that is to just consider our work like John the Baptist. We have a turning ministry in one another's lives and in the lives of those who have never, ever repented of their sins. They might have felt sorry. They might have gotten stung by their sin, but they didn't break. They didn't change.

And so consider our own activity in this community as agents of spiritual seismicity here. There is also what seismologists call earthquake swarms and earthquake storms. And they touch off sequences of earthquakes in areas, rapidly in short periods of time.

How blessed is that people who are not only daily repenting, but who are also calling for repentance. This is the work that we do as we prepare for heaven. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. The barn is ready and it is fully furnished to receive the humble and confessing broken people like those who met John the Baptist who had been so hurt by sin and they came out confessing their sins. This was a humble people that were coming out into the wilderness, a humble and broken people, recognizing that their only hope was repentance toward God and faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's pray.

*Lord, again, we thank you of words of life here on this page of Scripture. We recognize only your Spirit can make them work in us. We pray that you would do that in this place. Amen.*