

*Joe Wright was the pastor of the Central Christian Church in Wichita, KS. On January 23, 1996, he was asked to be the guest chaplain for the Kansas State House in Topeka. He prayed a prayer of repentance that was written by Bob Russell, the pastor of Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky. According to an article in the Kansas City Star from January 24, 1996, his prayer stirred controversy, and one member of the legislative body walked out while others criticized the prayer.*

*But the controversy didn't end there. Later that year in the Colorado House, Republican Representative Mark Paschall angered lawmakers by using Joe Wright's prayer as the invocation. Some members there also walked out in protest.*

*Paul Harvey got a hold of the prayer and read it on his program. He got more requests for copies of it than any other thing he had ever done. So, here's the prayer:*

*"Heavenly Father, we come before you today to ask Your forgiveness and to seek Your direction and guidance. We know Your Word says, 'Woe to those who call evil good,' but that's exactly what we have done. We have lost our spiritual equilibrium and inverted our values. We confess that:*

*We have ridiculed the absolute truth of Your Word and called it 'pluralism'. We have worshipped other gods and called it 'multi-culturalism'. We have endorsed perversion and called it an 'alternative lifestyle'. We have exploited the poor and called it the 'lottery'. We have neglected the needy and called it 'self-preservation'. We have rewarded laziness and called it 'welfare'. We have killed our unborn and called it 'a choice'. We have shot abortionists and called it 'justifiable'. We have neglected to discipline our children and called it 'building self-esteem'. We have abused power and called it 'political savvy'. We have coveted our neighbor's possessions and called it 'ambition'. We have polluted the airwaves with profanity and called it 'freedom of expression'. We have ridiculed the time-honored values of our forefathers and called it 'enlightenment'.*

*Search us, O God, and know our hearts today; try us and see if there be some wicked way in us; cleanse us from every sin and set us free. Guide and bless these men and women who have been sent here by the people of Kansas, and who have been ordained by You to govern this great state. Grant them Your wisdom to rule and may their decisions direct us to the center of Your will... Amen."*

Wow! That's a prayer that described the American culture pretty well. It's a prayer which essentially calls out sin – in that no matter how it's neatly packaged

and intellectually justified – it’s still sin – sin against God. And, it’s a prayer which cries out for repentance by those who claim to know God.

You know, the majority of Americans identify as Christian – they claim to know God, but given the state of our culture, it seems that many of these same people also prescribe to a *gospel of addition* – meaning they believe they can *add* Jesus Christ to their lives, but not *subtract* their sin.

This morning, we are going to look at a prophet, who in many ways, was dealing with the same kind of people with the same kind of problem – religious people who claimed to know God, and yet many were unwilling to forsake their sinful ways.

So, if you have your Bible, turn to **Matthew 3**, and will begin with **verse 1** where Matthew tells us:

**<sup>1</sup>Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” <sup>3</sup>For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight!’”**  
**<sup>4</sup>Now John himself had a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.**

In this passage, Matthew begins with the phrase “**Now in those days**” – and with that phrase we have to leap frog some 28 years. Some 28 years have come and gone since Joseph and Mary and the Child Jesus returned from Egypt and made their way to the town of Nazareth – and in that long stretch of time, **Luke** tells us there are some new characters who have emerged on the scene. *Tiberius Caesar* is now the Roman Emperor, *Pontius Pilate* is the governor of Judea, *Herod Antipus* is the ruler of Galilee, and *Annas* and his son-in-law *Caiaphas* are the high priests.

Now in those days, Matthew tells us that another character emerged onto the scene, and it’s **John the Baptist**. I don’t know how you picture him, but to me he’s this rough and tough, straight-talking, “*Grizzly Adams*” kind of guy who stands out in a crowd and does not care what other people think. He’s wearing a garment of **camel’s hair** – he’s wearing the clothing of an Old Testament prophet during a crisis, and he’s munching on grasshoppers and honey. So, he has no fashion sense and he doesn’t seem to be a finicky eater.

We are also told that John was **preaching in the wilderness** – in the barren desert of Judea. For 400 years, heaven had been silent and a prophet of God had not been heard – but now the time has come, and John has a simple message from God.

**“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”**

**Why this message?** Well, I’ll tell you why. God’s people, for the most part, were religious, but in reality, they had abandoned their God. As a nation, the hearts of the people had become hard, and the religious leaders who were supposed to represent God and led the people to God were completely out of touch with God.

On one hand, you had the *Pharisees* who had become very *legalistic* in their views – turning God’s Word into nothing but a sledge hammer, and then on the other hand, you had their rivals, the *Sadducees*, who had become very *liberal* in their views to the point they denied most of God’s Word. Collectively, they were calloused and crooked, moving away from God – leading others away from God, but all the while, God was closer than they could have imagined, for the Messiah was in their midst preparing to begin His ministry, and they were called to repent.

That word **“repent”** is not a popular word. It wasn’t back then and it’s surely not now. The Greek word for *repent* is *metanoeo* which literally means “*to change your mind.*” That’s what it means. God’s people had been thinking wrongly about God, thinking wrongly about themselves, thinking wrongly about righteousness, thinking wrongly about God’s will, thinking wrongly about sin, and the kind of repentance that John preached was a *change of mind*, for when the mind is changed, a change of life will follow or to say it another way, if you *think* differently, then you will *walk* differently, but on the flip side – if there is no change in one’s walk – in one’s life, then there is no real repentance.

So, John commanded the people to repent – it’s a command, not a suggestion – to change their minds about God – to change their minds about sin because **the kingdom of heaven** was at hand.

Now, Matthew’s use of the phrase “*the kingdom of heaven*” throughout his gospel seems to be interchangeable with the phrase “*the kingdom of God*” used by the other gospel writers, and it seems that Matthew prefers this phrase because, if you remember, he is writing to a Jewish audience who were very hesitant to pronounce the name of God. So, *the kingdom of heaven* is another way of referring to kingdom of God – and John says it’s **at hand**, because the King is present and He’s about to reveal Himself.

Okay, if you will look at **verse 3**, you will see a reference about John the Baptist given by the prophet **Isaiah** – a reference quoted by all four gospel writers to explain who John was.

**<sup>3</sup>For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight!’”**

This quote comes directly from **Isaiah 40**, and to understand this quote, I need to put it into context for you.

The book of **Isaiah** was written during a period of turmoil in the southern kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel had just been taken into captivity, and the big question was – **would the southern kingdom of Judah follow suit?** Well, in the first part of his book, Isaiah mostly prophesied doom and gloom for those in Judah because of their sin against God, and despite the warnings from him and from other prophets as well, the Jews continued in their sin, and just as they had been warned, they too were taken captive and sent to Babylon.

That’s what happened – just as Isaiah said it would happen, but fortunately, Isaiah was not all doom and gloom, for beginning with **Chapter 40** – and this is the turning point – the hinge point for the entire book – Isaiah says that peace is coming, there’s a pardon by God, there’s restoration on the horizon, and there’s a prophecy about a messenger – a **voice** crying in the wilderness to prepare the way for the coming Lord – a voice, none other than John the Baptist, who makes the road straight for the Messiah who is on His way.

**Now, can you imagine the reaction of the Jews who were familiar with these words from Isaiah?** If John is the prophesied herald, then one has to assume that the long-awaited King and Messiah is coming, so they had better get themselves ready, and beginning with **verse 5**, we see people moving in God’s direction.

**<sup>5</sup>Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan; <sup>6</sup>and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins.**

So, John is out there literally in the middle of nowhere – in the desert, that’s where God has led him, and at the beginning, I don’t know who he is preaching to – if anyone. He didn’t send out flyers, he didn’t canvas the area, there was no social

media, he's not even doing miracles, he's just out there preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit, and over time, the word starts to spread about this strange preacher. Little by little, word reaches those in Jerusalem, in the region Judea, and all around the Jordan River. People from all walks of life wanted to see and hear for themselves what this preacher had to say, and so they make their way into the desert, and these people are completely overwhelmed and moved to repentance.

We are told that John **baptized** them as they changed their minds about God, and not only that – they agreed with God by confessing that their sins were just that – sins against God. Now, I want to point something out here about baptism that you may not know. In that day, the Jews ritually baptized Gentile converts into Judaism, and if these converts were male, they would also be circumcised. It was a symbolic way for a Gentile to identify with the Jewish religion, but here, John is baptizing Jews – a baptism that required a great amount humility for Jew, showing their willingness to turn from their sin and to prepare for the coming King.

It had to be something to see out there in the desert along the Jordan River, but according to Matthew, John sees something else as well, and beginning with **verse 7**, this is what we are told:

**<sup>7</sup> But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” <sup>8</sup> Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; <sup>9</sup> 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 to Abraham. <sup>10</sup> 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.**

The **Pharisees** and the **Sadducees** – these two rival religious parties, were coming together, coming out to see the baptisms, but mostly to find out who this John was, and when John sees them – they become his focus and he has some choice words for them – words that no one else would dare say.

John calls these religious leaders **vipers** – they're poisonous, and sneaky, and subtle in their ways. Yes, they are there in the desert, but it's only out of curiosity, and of course, to be seen by others – to *make a good showing*, but in reality, to John they were simply *showing their true colors* and he knew these religious leaders had no intention of changing their minds about God, about His will, about righteousness, or about their sin, and because they were unwilling to change their minds – they wouldn't change their ways.

John knew they would not repent, and on top of that, he anticipated how they would respond by playing the “*entitlement card*” and let me explain. The Jews assumed they were entitled to a right standing with God – they had *ancestral leverage* because they had come from the line of **Abraham**, and therefore, they had no worries – they had their fire insurance policy and could do what they wanted. According to the *Mishnah*, which is a written collection of the early oral Jewish interpretations of Scripture, the Jews believed that the ancestors of Abraham would inherit the world to come. Some taught that Abraham stood guard at the gates of hell, and a Jew – not a Gentile could say to him, “*I am your seed*” and Abraham would send them to heaven. They claimed that it was by Abraham’s righteousness – because *he* trusted God – that *they* would enter heaven, but John challenged this false belief with the words, “**for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham.**”

Let me say, there are several views when it comes to “*these stones*”. Some suggest “*these stones*” may have been Gentiles who had come out to see John. Others say “*these stones*” should be taken literally, meaning John is referring to pebbles lying along the river bank. Then, there are those who claim that “*these stones*” refer to the same stones mentioned way back in **Joshua 4** when the Israelites, under the leadership of Joshua, crossed the roaring Jordan River when it was at flood stage.

In that account, by God’s command and by faith, the priests carried the Ark of the Covenant into the river – and as they did, the river parted just like the Red Sea had done for Moses. As the Israelites crossed, God told the leaders of the 12 tribes to take a stone from the river, and stack them up on the land as a memorial of that faithful event. So, the place where John was baptizing might be the very same place where the Israelites had crossed the Jordan River and set up a memorial with stones – stones that may have still remained – stones that John said God could raise up as children to Abraham – implying that God would prefer lifeless stones over lifeless people with stone-cold hearts who are unwilling to change their ways.

John continues and says the **axe** is ready to swing – this is not pruning, this is not trimming – the axe is ready to chop down their so-called religious entitlements and privileges and assumptions – ready to cut them off because they were fruitless – unwilling to change their minds, and unwilling to change their ways, and then beginning with **verse 11**, John tells them about who’s coming next. He says,

<sup>11</sup> “**As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will**

**baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.** <sup>12</sup> **His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”**

This is the end of John’s message – a message of *contrasts* that rightly leads to a *choice*, and when speaking of contrasts, John makes a clear distinction between himself and Jesus who comes after him.

In this passage, John explains that his baptism was only preparatory in nature – it was intended to prepare people for the coming King and Messiah. He didn’t tell people to “*try harder*” to please God, but rather to repent of their sins and to trust in the One who was coming – who is mighty – who is worthy, and He – referring to Jesus, would baptize in two different ways – with the **Holy Spirit** and with **fire**.

With the **Holy Spirit**, God would make a permanent spiritual deposit of His indwelling presence in the lives of those who receive the gospel message of salvation and trust Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. It’s in this spiritual baptism – a baptism that occurs at the moment of salvation, that believers identify with their King.

Then there is the baptism of **fire**, and this fire is not the appearance of fire at Pentecost as some might suggest. In context, this fire – described as an *unquenchable fire* speaks clearly of judgment where the wheat is separated from the chaff and the chaff is then burned, meaning Jesus not only comes as the Savior who, by grace, gives us eternal life with God, but He will also come as the Judge who brings wrath upon those who have rejected God’s free offer of salvation.

So, John the Baptist was sent to call people to repent – to change their minds and their ways. In many respects it’s an invitation – an invitation that’s still given to people today – an invitation that prompts a choice. Repent and turn to God or refuse and face the terrible consequences. There’s no middle ground here, so repent.

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