

Preparation for Christmas

3-Year Bible Reading Plan

By Dr. Jeff Meyers

sermonaudio.com

Bible Text: Matthew 3:1-4
Preached On: Sunday, December 2, 2018

Crossroads Ministries
301 S. 8th Street
Opelika, Alabama 36801

Website: www.fbcopelika.com
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/jeffmeyers

You know, as we approach what we know as this Christmas season, even though what we've just sung was a modern adaptation of a classic Christmas carol, "The First Noel," the overwhelming majority of what we know as Christmas songs were not originally written in English, they were written in Dutch and in German and in other languages of such, and this is one of the few words, one of the few lines of Christmas songs that we've just kept in the original language and you don't have to raise your hand and confess, but a lot of us have no idea what Noel means. It means birthday and so when we sing the classic carol, "The First Noel," it's the first birthday celebration of the Messiah when we celebrate that manger scene and that Christmas evening. So as we talk about the Savior has come, Noel, Noel, we have the privilege today because of his birth, because of his life, because of his death and resurrection we can celebrate the totality that including his birth not just the first time but for all times. So today is, again, the opportunity as we enter this season to celebrate the coming of our Messiah, Christ the King.

Let's pray.

Lord, as we gather at this time, Lord, you have blessed us immeasurably. Lord, we've had the privilege of seeing the voices of our preschoolers raised, we've seen the opportunity of families deciding and choosing to raise their children according to your way, your will and your word versus anything else. Lord, we have declared your truth in song and, Lord, as we approach this season with so many of its distractions and, Lord, and so much of it that even has good and well intentions, Lord, as we declare that word Noel, may it be Immanuel, may it be God with us, may it be the celebration of you that rises above all the noise of this season. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

This morning, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the book of Matthew 3. As you're turning to Matthew 3, today I want to address a subject matter of how to prepare for or the preparation for Christmas. Now as we walk through this thing called life, I think we'd all agree particularly in our culture today, that we are a culture that loves to celebrate. We celebrate special days, holidays, and typically a lot of those celebrations, they involve special meals, some of them involve special travel, some of them involve even the giving of gifts to one another, but there is no celebration in our culture quite like

what we know as Christmas, in fact, we prepare for this celebration probably as much or more than all others combined.

Allow me to illustrate. What other holiday on our calendar do we watch movies themed about three months in advance? None. What other holiday or special day in our culture or our calendar do we arrange a dozen or more dinner parties in or about that time period? None. I've got one for you and maybe this happens in your home and I'm sure there are those that do it for other days, but at least in the Meyers' house, this is the only season where we actually have decorations in the attic for the house because there is so much to put out and there's so much to display. We recognize other holidays, we recognize other celebrations and, sure, my wife takes time to decorate and to make the home look such as, but nothing like this season. In fact, I want to share with you in the last week I bet I've been to the attic at least a dozen times putting stuff up, changing mind, bringing it back, going back, going forth. I don't have to do this for any other season but this one and so if we're going to prepare so much with the movies and shows that we watch, with the arrangement of our social lives, as such, or even the decoration of our homes, I think it just seems prudent today to look in Matthew 3 and say how should we personally, as a family spiritually, prepare for what we know as Christmas.

In Matthew 3, we have a fabulous example. We have an individual who puts on display for us not only his words, his actions, but even his attire or his address to help us focus on what we know as Christmas. This is John the Baptist. Beginning in Matthew 3:1, we have this character known as John the Baptist who will be the forerunner, he will be the preparer of, he will be the announcer of Jesus Christ as Messiah and coming King. And what I want us to see today are a couple of things, the first is this: that you and I have a very similar story. There's a parallel in our lives. As he announced the coming of the Messiah, we'll see in just a moment that we have the opportunity to announce the soon coming of the King as well. And secondly is we see an individual who was focused on why he was walking the earth, he was focused on everything that the Lord had for his life, so he challenges us not only to prepare the way but to have a life that is focused on the right things at the right time for the right reasons.

Beginning in verse 1 of Matthew 3, it says,

1 In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, 2 And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. 3 For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 4 And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat [or his food] was locusts and wild honey.

Hang in there with me and I promise we'll get to how he was dressed and what he ate, but two things I want to simply address this morning. The first is this: the mission that John the Baptist engaged in; what he was doing in life; why he was doing what he was doing.

And we're going to see that though it may be a little bit different, you and I today, this season in particular, we have the privilege of engaging in the same mission.

Now let's begin with this purpose: why was John the Baptist even here? And though these four verses only give us just kind of a small capsule of his life, when you begin to put all the pieces together in the Gospel accounts, you have an incredible supernatural story of his purpose. In fact, today is the day where we celebrated Parent Commissioning. We celebrated those that are gathering around within their homes and their extended family saying that, "We desire for our children to be raised in a biblical, Gospel-centered home." And yet the same was true with whom we know as John the Baptist, albeit just a tad bit different. In fact, John the Baptist's dad was a priest in those days and he was going about doing the religious duties that were called of him, and as he was doing so, the Lord came to him and very similar to Abraham and Sarah in the Old Testament, his wife Elizabeth and he were a little bit past the typical birthing years and he said, "You are going to have a son. He is going to be the forerunner of the Messiah. He is going to be the herald thereof. He's going to be in the image of Elijah, the great prophet." Well, Zachariah did what most of us would do, he doubted, he questions. For some reason he didn't believe that it could come to fruition the way the Lord spoke. So what happened? Much like Isaac in the Old Testament being named "laughter" because they laughed, the Lord said, "His name will be John and to show you such that you will not be able," this is Zachariah the dad, "you will not be able to speak verbally again until he is born and you declare it."

So for the next months, he was silent. The day came where whom we know as John the Baptist was born and they wondered would he be named after his dad? Would he be named after his granddad? And he said, "No," he wrote down, "His name is John." It was at that point that his tongue was loosed and so we see everything surrounding his conception and his birth, it's a very purposeful thing, in fact, if we were to go back about three months from that moment, there's this incredible encounter in Luke 1 where Mary, the mother of Jesus, has discovered that she is with child because of the Holy Ghost so she runs to meet her cousin Elizabeth, John the Baptist's mother, and in doing so – now understand, Elizabeth is six months pregnant, Mary is newly pregnant with whom we know as Jesus Christ – when she announces to Elizabeth that she is carrying the Christ child, when she announces that the Messiah that has been anticipated for thousands of years is in her womb, the Bible records in Luke 1:41 that John the Baptist in the womb of Elizabeth leaps for joy and she was filled with the Holy Ghost.

Now I don't know where you come from, that's pretty supernatural. That's pretty purposeful. We see that John the Baptist, his entire life, had a very strategic, distinct purpose. Not only was the conception, not only was the birth, not only was the life but his ministry was very purposeful. In fact, notice he says, "Repent, the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Prepare ye the way of the Lord." Every aspect of his life was pointing people to Jesus. In fact, it would be on the banks of the Jordan River as folks were coming and being baptized day after day, he would say, "Behold, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world."

Throughout his life that would end shortly after this account, there was a very strong political leader by the name of Herod. Herod had a lifestyle that was not conducive to biblical standards, it was contrary to how the Bible had laid things out, and John the Baptist spoke the truth. In fact, the Bible records that Herod loved to hear John the Baptist teach and preach and he made it clear to Herod that, "You're in a relationship you have no business being in. You are involving yourself in another man's family in a way that you have no business doing and the Lord knows of it." Even though he was convicted by the message, he held John in his dungeon. Some days later, the woman of note that was involved in this illicit relationship finds herself in the palace, her daughter dances a dance for Herod, he is so pleased he says, "Whatever you want up to half the kingdom, tell me and I'll give it to you." Do you know what her answer was? "I want John the Baptist's head on a charger."

When we look at the purpose of John the Baptist, yes, it was a supernatural very purposeful birth, life and message, but when you get to the end of the Bible in the book of Revelation, there are two individuals who show up, these famous two witnesses that lose their life in the same manner as John the Baptist did and yet Jesus declared he would be and after the spirit of Elijah. So his purpose, his entire reason for living was to make sure that people noticed and heard about Jesus Christ. Do you see the parallel for us? Do you see the example for us as the body of Christ, that we have a very similar mission?

Then there's this proclamation, it says in verse 2, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Now when we talk about the mission, in just a moment we're going to talk about the message, you may be wondering why are we talking about what he said in light of the mission, but they really coalesce and they go together. Notice what he said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Now that's a word we don't hear much anymore. That's a concept that has become foreign to our communities and to our culture because when you declare that someone needs to repent, you are implying that they are not perfect. You're implying that they're messed up. You're implying that they've got some problems. And yet you and I live in a world today, everybody wants to assume and presume that we don't have any problems. Can I just confess for all of us? We're all messed up. We've all got issues and yet today, what do we want to do in our culture? We want to excuse, we want to dismiss, we want to marginalize. Hey, listen, he said the problem is we're messed up, the problem is we need to repent, we need to change our direction. We are headed the wrong way.

You know, this season where there are so many cards that are given, so many pictures that are taken, when is the last time you saw a Christmas card with the word repent on it? You say, "Well, that wouldn't be a real friendly gesture." Well, maybe it's spoken of your family that we are repenting, I don't know, I'm not trying to give you suggestions, but it was the proclamation, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Now that's an interesting phrase in your Bible. "The kingdom of heaven" is used 32 times in your Bible and it's only in the Gospel of Matthew, and in this very first Gospel message of the New Testament, every time it comes up whether it's in the Sermon on the Mount or whether it's later in chapter 13 with these great parables, or on the Mount of

Olives in chapter 24 and 25 when Jesus is talking about the end of the world, every single time it comes up there is just somewhat of this tone of the Lord's descent, his reign, his return. This is where the parallel is easily seen. John the Baptist proclaimed, his mission was to say, "The Messiah is coming at any moment." Do you realize that our declaration, our mission, our proclamation is to say that the Messiah could return at any moment?

Notice it says here "the kingdom of heaven is at hand." You know, when you make this parallel today, one of my favorite passages is in 1 Corinthians 15 beginning in verse 52, "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the sound of the trumpet, that the dead in Christ and those alive with Christ shall meet together with the Lord in the air." In other words, when you look at these passages about the Lord's soon return and his reign, you get this idea of an immediacy. The same thing happened with John the Baptist. He was there at the River Jordan, he was baptizing folks for their desire to repent of their sins but he kept telling them every day at any moment Jesus could show up, and when he shows up, I'm going to get out of the way because it's all about him. You see, his proclamation was we need to change, we need to repent, we need to turn from our sins because Jesus could show up at any moment. Is that not what our mission should be today? That we need to be within our homes, within our communities, declaring that we need to get right with the Lord because the Lord could return at any moment at hand, in the blinking of an eye.

But you also see in verse 3 that it was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah. Not only was his mission one of very strategic purpose, not only did he proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," but it was the mission that was a fulfillment of prophecy; that Isaiah said there would be one to prepare the way of the Lord. Now if you want to be real strict about the prophecy here, it's really a fulfillment of Elijah, the great prophet of 1 Kings 8. In fact, Jesus Christ said himself that John the Baptist came in the spirit and the likeness of whom we know as Elijah. And you see a man, Elijah, who performed great supernatural feats, in fact, the Bible says he brought people back from the dead; he put his mantle in the water and it split like the Red Sea; he was the one that prayed and for 3 ½ years it didn't rain and then when he prayed, it did rain. An incredible prophetic figure, but when you get to the very last chapter of your Old Testament, when you get to the book of Malachi 4, that's right, Elijah shows up again and though he's already been caught up in the chariot, though he's been caught up in that chariot of fire earlier in the Old Testament, it says that before the Messiah shows up that Elijah will return, and Jesus made it clear that John the Baptist was there in the spirit and likeness of Elijah.

Now the reason that's important for us to understand is this: that when John the Baptist showed up, it meant the Savior was right around the corner. When John the Baptist showed up, that meant that the Messiah, Jesus Christ, could appear at any moment, any day, to declare his mission and purpose on earth. Do you realize that you and I today, the church of Jesus Christ, the body of believers that we are, we are the Elijah of today? Not specifically, don't read over literally into that, but we are the heralders, we are the forerunners, we are the ones saying that after us, the church, he's coming. We are the forerunner of his return. We are the heralders of his return.

So in this season with so much celebration and so much that is taking place, one of the things we discover is that John the Baptist gives us a pretty good picture, a pretty good example of how to focus in and to be strategic about this season which leads to his message because when you see what he says, not only repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand, but prepare the way of the Lord, when you see how he's dressed, one of the things that you discover is that his message was very painful. Notice what it says, he was crying in the wilderness. Now just think about that for a moment. Here's an individual that though he went to the River Jordan and he was baptizing folks, we don't get the idea that there were hundreds or even thousands there, we just get the idea that there were folks that came and they brought fruits unto repentance and it caught the Pharisees' attention and they were curious what was happening, and there was a buzz going on but he's called a voice crying in the wilderness. There's this idea, there's this imagery that he was the vocal minority.

You see, this Christmas season, if you put Jesus Christ in his rightful spot, you will be the vocal minority. In fact, we're told to go to the parties, we're told to sing the songs, we're told to celebrate the season, we're told to decorate our houses, but somehow the culture says, "But leave Jesus out of it." You do realize if it weren't for Jesus, we wouldn't have any of it. In fact, let me get even more specific. You do understand that if it were not for Easter, we wouldn't celebrate Christmas? If Jesus Christ had not risen from the dead, you wouldn't have to go up in your attic and drag down a tree because nobody, nobody would celebrate his birth because his entire ministry was focused on his death and his resurrection, and it is painful to keep Jesus at the center of Christmas because there's not a whole lot of people doing it nowadays, there's not a whole lot of people putting Jesus in his rightful spot. Oh sure, we want the food, we want the entertainment, we want the fun, but as soon as we put Jesus in the mix, it makes people uncomfortable.

I've shared this with some of you before and it's just kind of, I hate to use the word tradition in this sense, but maybe it's more of a strategy that the Meyers' family has adopted. We have a tree. I mentioned getting it out of the attic, in fact, one of the greatest blessings of my life – oh, guys, one of the greatest blessings of my life, thank you, Lord, for the prelit Christmas tree. That's all I've got to say. But nonetheless, we put the tree up and we put the decorations and the ornaments and such, but there's one very unique thing in the Meyers' house when it comes to Christmas decorations and when people walk in and they see it for the first time or they see a picture, it really catches them a little off-guard and it may seem a little strange but it can be painful when it comes to discussing it. Our tree-topper, I mean what you put at the top of the tree is a crown of thorns. Can we just be honest, that just makes us a little uncomfortable, does it not? With all the ornaments that our kids have made, the presents under the tree, and all of a sudden there's a crown of thorns?

Now we do that for several reasons, the first one is this: we want to remind ourselves, mom and dad included, that if it weren't for an empty tomb, we wouldn't even have this tree in our house. We want to make sure that the message stays complete, but second of all, it forces us maybe even subconsciously to keep the totality of Jesus at the center of Christmas. I can't tell you how many times people have seen the top of our tree and given

us a weird kind of look because that is a voice crying in the wilderness to put the crown of thorns as a part of the Christmas story, but John the Baptist, he was a lone voice. We put Jesus at the center, we're going to be a lone voice too.

But I want you to see verse 4, that his dress or his attire, his raiment of camel hair and a leather girdle, or a leather belt, and I want to declare that his message was very practical. Now, I want to be very clear, the Bible says that the love of money is the root of all evil. There are some very wealthy people in your Bible that found favor with the Lord and were godly and righteous people. Abraham was very wealthy. David was very wealthy. Solomon was incredibly wealthy. In fact, the Apostle Paul before his conversion probably was a very wealthy individual. So we cannot determine that the size of one's bank account is determinative or non-determinative of their level of righteousness, in fact, I would say some of the greediest people I've ever met were not very wealthy. So it's not the amount that you have, it's the attitude you have toward.

Here comes John and he's dressed in a camel coat and a leather belt. We don't know all the story behind it but we do know that it's what he had made available to him. It wasn't like the robes that filled the rooms of the Pharisees and such that were questioning on the banks of the River Jordan. It was just practical. You say, "Well, where are you going with this?" You know, when it comes to this season, it's real easy to be impractical. It's real easy to blow your budget. It's real easy to get so focused on the trappings of Christmas that we miss Jesus in Christmas.

You know, some of the great advice we got years ago, I don't know who gave it to us, but it's really profound. Jesus only got three gifts, why should you get more? I mean, think about it. Let that sink in for just a moment. I mean, think about it, he got gold, frankincense and myrrh and yet we oftentimes, and I understand the motivations behind it, I get it, I'm a parent, I understand, but do you realize that just in our culture, just our culture, that 28% of you, now I'm not real good in math but that's more than 1 in 4 and less than 1 in 3, right? 28% of you who are buying Christmas presents today are still paying for your Christmas presents last year. 28% of us. Where is the practicality there? When we buy and acquire so much stuff, even stuff that we should not be acquiring, how is that practical?

So what we see in John the Baptist is he was within his means doing life and ministry the way that he was coming out of the wilderness, but last but not least, it's very picturesque. Now for our culture today, this is going to seem strange. Why was he eating locusts and wild honey? Now I just want to go ahead and say in advance, if I have the privilege of being in your presence at a Christmas party, I have never once nor will I ever want locusts and honey for the menu. But what you see here is more than just the specific items, and by the way speaking of food, I know you're all going to think I'm a little strange, I've already confessed to being a little strange, it's okay. Did you know the average American during this season will gain 7 pounds because we eat so much? Now I'd like to dig in that statistic a little more because I grew up Baptist, I am Baptist, and I know that we tilt the scales, no pun intended. I bet the average across America is probably 3 to 4 Baptists are probably 9 to 10, but nonetheless, now you know why all the gym

memberships are on sale come January. But he had a diet of locusts and honey, don't think calories, don't think dinner parties here, in fact, the conclusion of his message that's so critical for us to understand today is this: that these were not just specific food items, they were pictures of the entire Old Testament story.

Think about the locusts for just a moment. When pharaoh said he would let the Lord's people go and he did not, when he again went against his word and said, "I'm more interested in doing it my way than God's way," what came? One of the great plagues were the locusts that came and took all the greenery and all of the agriculture off of the fields, and yet it would be years later where the Israelites, they would go across the River Jordan into the land that we call the land of promise filled with milk and, that's right, honey. The blessings of God and the picture that we have from John the Baptist is not just one of practicality, it's not just one of purpose and such, but it's very picturesque, that when it comes to Jesus, when it comes to heralding this season, there's one of two avenues: it can be a time of proverbial judgment or a time of proverbial blessing.

You say, "Well, how does that all work out?" Let me give you the picture. If you haven't been there yet, I promise you will be one day. Most of us have probably experienced this at some level. There is going to come a time in the near future when all the presents have been opened, there's going to come a time where all the food has been eaten, there's going to come a time where all the decorations, they're going to go back in the boxes, and I'm going to ask you in advance, weeks in advance to think about this: is that moment, is that day going to be a locust day or a honey day? It is going to be a time where we look and say everything in life has been ravaged. My bank account's been ravaged. Our house has been ravaged. The food has been ravaged. My energy has been ravaged. I'm tired now than when I took it from the attic in the first place. It's like the locusts have come down and taken everything. Or is it going to be a time of honey? Is it going to be a time where you look back at the individuals and even the gifts and the celebration and talk about what a wonderful time it was?

You do know that that analogy has nothing to do with the number or the amount of money spent on presents or the amount of calories in the food or the number of people in the home. You see, at that moment a few weeks from now, it will all be based on how you approached the season and if it becomes just about presents and just about parties and just about all that stuff, then it's going to feel like the locusts have come through in a few weeks, but if you put Jesus at the center of it, it doesn't matter how many or how few parties, how many or how few presents are given, it's going to feel like honey when you see the blessing and the favor of the Lord looking back.

So as we prepare this Christmas season, we have an opportunity to look at John the Baptist, in fact, you and I today have several weeks as we approach this special time of the year and we have a decision to make when we look back in a few weeks, will we look at a swarm of locusts or the joys of the honey?

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. You know, as we talk about the trappings and the celebration of this season, when we talk about the gifts and we talk

about all of the traditions and such, you can have all the presents, you can have all the parties, you can eat all the food and still miss out on the whole reason for Christmas, that's Jesus Christ. Maybe you're here today and maybe you're one of those individuals, maybe you're one of those persons throughout the course of life you say, "You know, I've done all the celebrations, I've sung all the carols, I've attended all the parties, but somehow in some way I missed Jesus in the midst of it all." I've got great news for you, the Bible says whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. It doesn't qualify that based on how many years you've lived life, how many good or bad decisions you've made, how many times you have or have not attended a religious or church service, it just says whoever. It doesn't matter who you are or where you've been or what you've done or who you've done it with, whoever calls on the name of the Lord should be saved.

Maybe that's who you are today, maybe today you're saying, "I need to call on the Lord. I need to be forgiven. I need to be saved." I've got great news for you, you don't have to sign up for a special class, you don't have to check off boxes, you don't have to jump through religious hoops, you just need to have a sincere conversation with the Lord. You don't have to have this conversation out loud, in fact, you don't even have to say the same words that I might say but maybe your conversation would go a little something like this. "God, I just want to confess, I just want to admit what you already know about myself. I've missed it. I've sung the songs, I've gone to the parties, I've even attended the services, but Jesus has no place or part in my life and I just want to admit that I believe today that I need to repent, that I'm the problem, I'm the one who has sinned and that Jesus Christ is the only answer. God, today I believe, I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to be born on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to live a sinless life on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to pay the price for my sins on the cross and I believe that three days later he rose from the dead so I could be forgiven and I could be saved. God, today I don't have all the answers to the world's problems, I don't even have the answers to half of my problems, but I do know that Jesus Christ is the only answer to my sin problem and I'm asking you to forgive me, I'm asking you to save me. In the best way I know how, I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, maybe today is the day you had that conversation, maybe today is that day that for the very first time you had that conversation with the Lord, we want to celebrate with you. In fact, in a moment we'd love the privilege of having a conversation with you celebrating what the Lord has done. But maybe, maybe today you're that one who's already had that conversation, in fact, some of you I would dare say you got saved years ago, decades ago, but as you go through the season, the decorations and the parties and such, Jesus is on the periphery, he's on the edge, he's on the outskirts of your life, and maybe today is one of those renewal days, maybe today is one of those rededication days, maybe today is one of those days where you say, "Do you know what? I need to put Jesus not just at the center of Christmas but the center of everything." We'd love to celebrate with you whatever decision, we just would love to have a conversation with you today.

Lord, as we come to this time in our service, we are so grateful for your hand of provision, mercy and grace. Lord, when we look back at the decisions we've made, the words we've spoken, the places we've been and the thoughts we've had, Lord, we know deep down inside we deserve nothing less than judgment, but yet you desire to forgive us, you desire to save us, you desired to become one of us and to redeem us. Lord, it's unfathomable that all you ask us to do is believe and receive. So Lord, we yield to that today and I pray that wherever we are, whatever we're dealing with, that your voice would be the only voice we hear. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

I'm going to ask you to stand with me as our team leads us. Whatever decision, I'll be right here at the front.