

## **PREPARE YOURSELF FOR THE LORD'S PRESENCE**

*1 [This is] the beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, Behold, I send my messenger ahead of you, the one who shall prepare your way. 3[He will be] the voice crying out in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths for him. 4So John came, baptizing in the wilderness and preaching the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. 6John was clothed with a garment made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7[Now this is what] he preached, After me there is coming someone who is mightier than I. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thongs of his sandals. 8I baptized you with water; but he shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*  
(Mark 1:1-8)

### **See attached Appendix for the parallel text of Matthew 3:1-12**

A note on the Scripture text that accompanies each individual message: The *American Standard Version* and the *New International Version*, along with the original Greek and Hebrew, have been used in an effort to achieve the greatest degree of accuracy and clarity. Where words or phrases have been added to the original text in an effort to better express its meaning, those words or phrases have usually been indicated by means of [brackets].

### **Introduction**

What usually happens around your house when you are expecting a guest for dinner or for an overnight stay? If your house is like our house, what happens is a lot of preparation: carpets are vacuumed, the kitchen floor is mopped, shelves are dusted, piles of clutter are put away, fresh linens are put on the guest room bed, the children are instructed to put away their toys.

Once I made the mistake of forgetting to inform my wife that we would be entertaining a guest; providing supper and overnight accommodations for him. That was a mistake! Upon receiving the news, my wife immediately went into high gear in an effort to prepare our house and our family to receive the guest.

The Gospel of Mark begins with the ministry of John the Baptist, and his divine calling to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Just as the people of Israel were instructed to prepare themselves for Christ's first coming, so we are instructed to prepare ourselves, not only for His second coming, but also that we may entertain His presence among us now.

## I. Prepare Yourself for the LORD's Presence, by Practicing Repentance (Mk. 1:4)

The central feature of John's ministry was the call to repentance. True biblical repentance involves the following features. First, we must honestly recognize sin for what it is: it is transgression against God. It is personal transgression; quoting the Psalmist, he admits to "*my sin*,"

*Have mercy upon me, O God, in accordance with your lovingkindness; in accordance with the multitude of your tender mercies blot out my transgressions.* <sup>2</sup>*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.* <sup>3</sup>*I am aware of my transgressions; and my sin is always before me.* <sup>4</sup>*Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in your sight.* (Psl. 51:1-4a)

We must acknowledge that our sin is intentional; it is a transgression, it is not "a mistake;" again, note the admission made by David in Psalm 51:1, "*Have mercy upon me, O God, in accordance with your lovingkindness; in accordance with the multitude of your tender mercies blot out my transgressions.*" Furthermore, we must acknowledge that our sin is hateful to God and causes a separation between us and God, just as the LORD Himself informs Old Testament Israel through the prophet Isaiah: "*your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear*" (Isa. 59:2.)

Second, we must renounce sin. The prophet Isaiah exhorts the sinner, whoever he may be, "*Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon*" (Isa. 55:7.) The Apostle Paul gives this admonition: "*Let every one who confesses the name of the Lord turn away from unrighteousness*" (2 Tim. 2:19b.)

Third, it is necessary to rely upon the Holy Spirit if our repentance is to be successfully accomplished; as Paul writes to the church at Rome, "*if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the flesh* [i.e.; the misdeeds of the sinful nature], *you will live*" (Rom. 8:13.)

For whom is repentance necessary? It is necessary for every practicing sinner who is separated from God. It is also necessary for every Christian each time we engage in sin and so remove ourselves from God. Repentance is an ongoing process, one in which the Christian must continually rely upon the Holy Spirit, surrendering our will unto Him.

In John's ministry the call for repentance was linked to baptism with water for the forgiveness of sins. The people "*came out to him*"—symbolizing their repentance—and "*were baptized by him*" (vs. 5.) In the Old Testament era the application of water physically symbolized the cleansing of the soul and the forgiveness of sins; note, for example, the promise the LORD makes in Ezekiel

36:25, *"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols."* True cleansing from sin and forgiveness can only be accomplished by the shedding of blood: *"In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness"* (Heb. 9:22.) The shed blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the divinely provided blood that provides true cleansing for the soul and forgiveness of sins. Bringing together these two essential elements, repentance and cleansing in the blood of Jesus, the Apostle Peter writes,

*As obedient children, no [longer] conform to the passions you formerly [had when you lived] in ignorance. <sup>15</sup>But just as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, <sup>16</sup>because it is written, "Be holy, because I am holy." ... <sup>18</sup>knowing that you were redeemed from your futile way of life handed down from your forefathers—not by perishable things, [such as] silver or gold, <sup>19</sup>but with precious blood, as of a lamb without blemish or defect, [the blood] of Christ. (1 Pet. 1:14-15,18-19)*

According to Matthew's gospel (Matt. 3:8,) John's call to repentance was accompanied by the call to *"produce fruit worthy of repentance."* There must be not only the negative renouncing of sin, but also the positive practice of righteousness:

*... each of you must put away falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor ... <sup>28</sup>He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with those in need ... <sup>31</sup>Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. <sup>32</sup> Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Eph. 4:25,28,31-32)*

The counterpart to the works of the old sinful nature (Gal. 5:19-21) is the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23a),

*Now the works of the sinful nature are well known, [such as]: sexual immorality, moral impurity, debauchery, <sup>20</sup>idolatry, witchcraft, hatreds, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, <sup>21</sup>envy, drunkenness, orgies, and other such things. I warn you [again], just as I [previously] warned you, that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. (Gal. 5:19-21)*

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, integrity, <sup>23</sup>meekness, self-control. (Gal. 5:22-23a)*

The baptism with water not only symbolized the cleansing and forgiveness of sin, but also the death to sin and the resurrection unto new life, as the Apostle Paul teaches in Romans 6:3-4,

*Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup>We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. (Rom. 6:3-4)*

Consider not only John's message, but also the audience to whom he presented his message. Within the audience there were devout Jews who trusted in the LORD and lived lives devoted to Him—these people would acknowledge the truth and necessity of John's message and know it as a spiritual reality in their own lives. An example of such a man is Simeon: *"[Simeon] was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him"* (Lk. 2:25.)

Also within the audience there were nominal Jews whose lives were no different than the pagans—by the Spirit of God they were awakened to the truth and necessity of John's message and responded to it in faith and obedience. An example from this category of people are the tax collectors: *"Tax collectors also came to be baptized. 'Teacher,' they asked, 'what should we do?'"* (Lk. 3:12.) Finally, there were within that audience self-righteous Jews who put confidence in their religious observance instead of in the LORD—they viewed John's ministry as something that did not pertain to them. Notice that Matthew describes them as *"coming to where [John] was baptizing,"* (Matt. 3:7,) but not presenting themselves for baptism.

John identifies them as *"a brood, or 'offspring,' of vipers."* In so doing he is identifying them as children of the devil, not children of God—note that in the Garden of Eden the devil appeared in the form of a serpent (Gen. 3:1-ff.) John inquires of them, *"Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"* The gist of his question is: "Who gave you directions as to how to flee from the coming wrath? Whoever it was has misled you by allowing you to think you can be saved by your own 'good works' and religious affiliation. The true and only way to be saved is by repenting of your sins and putting your faith in the coming Messiah—the Lord Jesus Christ."

Let us prepare ourselves for the Lord's presence, by practicing repentance.

*He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy. (Prov. 28:13)*

*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ... <sup>12</sup>... to all who received him, to those who are believing on his name, he gave the right to become children of God. (Jn. 1:29,12)*

## II. Prepare Yourself for the LORD's Presence, Because He Administers Either Divine Blessing or Judgment (Mk. 1:8)

In response to their questions, John testifies, *"He who is coming after me is mightier than I ... he shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire"* (Matt. 3:11.)

The baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire was at least partially fulfilled at Pentecost: *"They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire ... <sup>4</sup>All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit"* (Acts 2:3-4.) The result of Pentecost was heavenly fellowship with God and with one another in Christ:

*Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, <sup>47</sup>praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.* (Acts 2: 46-47)

John's reference to Christ baptizing with *"the Holy Spirit and fire"* should, in one sense, be taken to mean that Christ administers the divine blessing of God to those who believe in Him—He brings them into fellowship with the Father by means of the Holy Spirit and His sanctifying (i.e.; purifying) work.

But the phrase, *"the Holy Spirit and fire,"* not only refers to the purifying work of the Spirit in the life of the believer, it also contains a reference to His work of judgment upon those who remain in their unrepentant state of sin. Matthew 3:12 emphasizes that Christ will make a final separation between those who believe in Him and those who remain in their sins: *"His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire"* (Matt. 3:12.)

In the prophecy of the Old Testament prophet Malachi, these two themes of fellowship with God for the redeemed and condemnation for the unrighteous are brought together as the great act that the LORD will accomplish in full measure on the day of His final appearing in glory:

*Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire, says the LORD Almighty. Not a root or a branch will be left to them. <sup>2</sup>But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.* (Mal. 4:1-2)

Let us prepare ourselves for the Lord's presence, because He administers either divine blessing or divine judgment. Christ will bring you into fellowship with God by the Holy Spirit—if you receive Him as your Savior; but He will bring the judgment of God upon those who continue to remain in their unrepentant state of sin.

## Conclusion

When you know a guest is coming, you are diligent to prepare yourself and your house for his presence. The message of John the Baptist, by which the Holy Spirit speaks to us today, urges us to prepare ourselves for the presence of Christ. John emphasizes that there is an urgency to deal with these great matters—it is necessary to make them first priority—and to live our lives in the light of these great things.

### Appendix: The Text of Matthew 3:1-12

*3 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, 2Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is about to come. 3This is the one who was spoken of through Isaiah the prophet, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the LORD, make straight paths for him. 4Now John himself wore a garment made of camel's hair and had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. 5People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region around the Jordan [River]. 6They were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.*

*7But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8Produce fruit worthy of repentance; 9and do not think to yourselves, We have Abraham for our father. I tell you, from these stones God is able to raise up children for Abraham. 10Even at this moment the axe lies at the root of the trees; every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down, and thrown into the fire. 11I indeed baptize you with water for repentance; but he who is coming after me is mightier than I—I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clear his threshing-floor. He will gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn up with unquenchable fire.*  
(Matt. 3:1-12)