

Repentance Leads to Community

Devotional Reading: 1 Peter 2:1–10.

Background Scripture: Mark 1:1–8; Matthew 3:1–12.

Lesson Text: Mark 1:1–8; Matthew 3:1–3.

Mark 1:1–8

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, ² as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way” — ³ “a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The 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. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with ^[L] the Holy Spirit.”

Matthew 3:1–3

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea ² and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³ This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

Today’s Aim

Facts: to show how John the Baptist broadcast the coming of Jesus and the community of faith He would make possible for those who repent of their sins.

Principle: to explain why Jesus considered John the Baptist to be the greatest of men (Matt. 11:11).

Application: to urge Christ's followers to emulate John the Baptist by making salvation known to everyone.

Introduction

Repent!

The ancient city of Nineveh must have been astonished to have a Hebrew prophet stand on the city streets and proclaim, “Repent or perish!” Fortunately for them, they listened to the warning and escaped destruction (see Jonah 1:2; 3:5–10).

It is hard to imagine a prophet finding similar success in any modern city. If someone stands on the sidewalks of New York or London and shouts a message of doom, he will be ignored or

hustled off to a psychiatric ward. Trying to get an entire community to repent is a tough job assignment.

John the Baptist had such an assignment. He was sent to warn the Jewish people to repent so that they would be ready for the coming of the Messiah. God wanted the people to whom Jesus would be sent to be a community of repentance.

Lesson Background

For over 400 years the Jewish nation had not heard a word from God. During that time they suffered oppression under the Greeks, the Syrians, and the Romans, but there was no word from God. At one point they rose up and tried to win their freedom during the time of the Maccabees, but there was still no word from God.

Malachi was the last prophet who had spoken for God. He promised another messenger (Malachi 3:1). In the closing verse of the Old Testament, the Lord called for changed hearts: “Lest I come and smite the earth with a curse” (Malachi 4:6). Then there was silence ... for 400 years.

Suddenly, loudly, outlandishly, the silence was broken. The rabbis in the cities and the peasants in the villages began to hear reports of a man in the desert who claimed to speak for God. The message he brought for the people of God was always the same: Repent! Prepare the way for the Lord!

Prophecy of Repentance (Mark 1:1–3)

God loves His people. In spite of their sins and backsliding, God repeatedly has sent messengers to summon His people to repentance. As prophesied by Isaiah, John the Baptist issues a great call for repentance by God’s community. The people are to prepare for the arrival of the Lord: God’s own Son is coming to redeem the world.

Just as the story of creation opens “In the beginning” (Genesis 1:1), the story of Jesus’ ministry in the Gospel of Mark also starts at the beginning. What Mark proceeds to write is more than just a biography; it is a gospel. It has the historical facts of a biography, but it is also like a sermon—a message intended to create repentance and faith. Of course, the word “gospel” means “good news” and is the message that Christ came to save the world through His sacrificial death on the cross. This is the story of “Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The very heart of the gospel message is the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 15:1-4). Mark will tell us, then, how God’s own Son is being sent as God’s chosen instrument of salvation for humanity.

1. How did Mark give his account of “the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Mark 1:1)?

One way we know that Scripture is reliable is the fulfillment of biblical prophecy (cf. 2 Peter 1:19-21). Besides the prophecies concerning the coming of Christ, there are other ones relating to both nations and individuals. The two prophecies mentioned by Mark found their fulfillment in the ministry of John the Baptist. The first prophecy (Mark 1:2) comes from Malachi 3:1; the second (Mark 1:3) is from Isaiah 40:3. While the Hebrew prophets frequently delivered messages contemporary to their hearers, they also had prophetic insight into future events. In both of the prophecies cited by Mark, the focus was on the one who would precede the Messiah.

John's ministry was not to declare a new message but to pave the way for the Lord Jesus, the Saviour of the world.

2. How can we be sure that the prophecies in the Bible "as it is written" are reliable (vs. 2,3)?

Unlike Jesus, John conducted his ministry in the wilderness, that desert region some twenty miles east of Jerusalem. While John may have gone other places to preach, it seems that his rather brief ministry was confined to the area near where the Jordan River empties into the Dead Sea. Although we do not know all the content of John's preaching, we do know that he preached "the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins." In other words, his baptism signified the forgiveness that came as a result of true repentance. Evidently, John was making an impact on the Jewish people, for great numbers made the journey to the wilderness to hear him preach and to be baptized. Prior to being baptized, the people were "confessing their sins" (Mark 1:5), thus affirming that they had repented of their evil ways (cf. 1 John 1:9).

3. What was the thrust of John's preaching (vs. 4,5)?

In the most important way, the message of John would not be any different: people still need to repent (see Acts 17:30). Also, it is likely that John would have some hard things to say to certain religious leaders of our day. Yet there would be some notable differences. Today John would loudly proclaim the death and resurrection of Christ, which grants forgiveness. He would repeat Peter's directions on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38). John would proclaim that believers are to draw on the power of the Holy Spirit. Who will be a John the Baptist for today?

4. If John the Baptist were preaching today, in what ways would his message be the same? In what ways would it be different? Why?

John does not look like any typical rabbi! His clothing shows that he cares nothing for the conventions of society. His sharply worded message is not designed to win him any friends. John's garments are woven of coarse camel's hair, commonly worn only by poor people. The clothing and wide leather belt link him with Elijah (2 Kings 1:8). In fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi 4:5, John the Baptist comes in the spirit and the power of Elijah to issue the call to repentance (Luke 1:17). While to most modern tastes John's diet leaves much to be desired, it was typical of poor nomads. Concerning the eating of locusts, the law declared that these insects were acceptable for food (Lev. 11:22). Growing up in the home of a Jewish priest, John was probably more aware than most concerning what foods were considered clean and unclean. The mention of John's lifestyle by the Gospel writers certainly indicates that his main focus was to call people to repentance so that they would be ready for the arrival of the Messiah.

5. How was John dressed? Why did he dress this way (v. 6)?

John was a true prophet of God who proclaimed the Messiah's coming, yet John wore rough clothing. Elijah, whom John emulated, was also a coarse-looking individual. Jesus is described in Isaiah 53:2 as one who "hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him." This is a lesson all of us need to keep relearning. The prophet Samuel learned this lesson when selecting David as the future king of Israel. Samuel had looked on the outward appearance, but the Lord looked at the heart (see 1 Samuel 16:7). King Saul had

good looks (1 Samuel 9:2), but turned out to be a spiritual dud. What was John's diet? Object of Repentance (Mark 1:7, 8)

6. Why is appearance an unreliable guide for evaluating a person's spiritual state? How do we avoid making a mistake in this area?

Concerning the imminent appearance of the Messiah, John had no illusions about the role he was to play (Malachi 3:1). He did not even consider himself worthy to stoop down and loosen the sandals of the Holy One. Once John introduced Christ to the nation, he was to fade into the background. John was not concerned about how popular he was or whether he would maintain a following of his own. Pointing others to Christ was his mission. This should be our mission as well. Christians often discover that when they forget about who gets credit for what is done, much more can be accomplished in the Lord's work. While John's baptism was with water, the One coming after him would baptize with the Holy Spirit. All four evangelists noted that Christ would perform this ministry (cf. Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16; John 1:33). Call for Repentance (Matthew 3:1-3) The Gospel of Matthew also emphasizes John's call for repentance. This is a necessary prelude to the ministry of Jesus. Yet Matthew does give additional information concerning the ministry of Christ. This is partly due to the purpose of each one of these writers. Mark penned his Gospel as a fast-paced, less detailed account of Christ's life. This may have had broader appeal to Romans. Matthew, however, was writing to Jews. He included more of the actual teaching of Jesus and how He fulfilled a number of specific Old Testament prophecies.

7. What promise did John make concerning the One who was coming after him (vs. 7,8)?

In Matthew 3:1 John is identified as "the Baptist," a designation Matthew used seven times (11:11-12; 14:2, 8; 16:14; 17:13). Whether John took this identification himself or others began calling him "the Baptist," we are not told. But John did not take it upon himself to begin baptizing the penitent. He did so because God had directed him in this ministry (cf. John 1:33). John's appearance, preaching a message of repentance, is in fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." John, the last of the prophets of Israel, was now commissioned to prepare the way for the King. The reign of God was immediately to be made manifest in Israel in all its fullness in the Person and the work of none other than the Messiah Himself.

8. Why was John called "the Baptist" (Matthew 3:1)?

No matter what era of history we are in, sin is a problem. The human need for repentance never changes. Our day is much more technologically advanced than was John's, but with every technological advance come ways to use that technology in sinful ways. John prepared the people of his day for Jesus' first appearance; we are here to prepare people for His second appearance. Thus the content of our message will be different in that regard. Also, John's particular method of preaching may not work today, given cultural differences between then and now. But preaching in and of itself will always be important.

9. In what ways are the circumstances of John's day similar to our own? How are the circumstances different? Why is this analysis important?

Besides proclaiming repentance and the imminent arrival of the Messiah, John also announced, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2). The term "kingdom of heaven" is used exclusively in Matthew. Comparing similar passages in Mark and Luke, we discover that they use the term "kingdom of God" (Mark 1:14-15; Luke 7:28; 17:20-21). Since Matthew was addressing Jews, he most likely used the designation "kingdom of heaven" to avoid using the name of God, which was customary among Jews not to do so. Concerning the coming kingdom that John announced, it is both God's realm and God's rule over that realm. In other words, it is both a kingdom and a kingship. It is a kingdom that is not of this world (see John 18:36). It is a kingship that rules over the hearts of people (see Luke 17:21). The Jews have long awaited a Messiah to establish a political kingdom on earth. Will they be able to accept God's plan instead?

10. What is the "kingdom of heaven" (v. 2)? What did John say about this kingdom?

Matthew, Mark, and Luke quote exactly the same words from Isaiah (see Isaiah 40:3; Mark 1:3; and Luke 3:4; compare John 1:23). "Make his paths straight" refers to the straightening or preparing of one's life in a right relationship with God in order to prepare for the coming of the King. Are you ready for the coming King?

11. What prophecy did Matthew quote concerning John (v. 3)?

Conclusion

"It's Time to Get Ready!"

Children often need to be told, "Hurry up! It's time to get ready!" Perhaps it's time for church or a special activity; perhaps company is coming. The importance of the event will require fresh clothing and a general cleanup.

The children of God in Judea also needed to get ready. The Messiah was coming, so they needed to wash up and get clean. In their case the cleansing needed to start on the inside with repentance—a change of mind. Only with this spiritual transformation would they be ready for His coming.

John said, "He that cometh after me is mightier than I" (Matthew 3:11), so Jesus was certainly important enough to deserve their preparation. When He came, He invited them into the community that John preached, the community characterized by repentance and forgiveness.

Repentance Means Change

Repentance means change: a change of heart and attitude that leads to changed behavior. We must be ready to change, because God himself does not change. As Malachi reminded Israel, "For I am the Lord, I change not" (Malachi 3:6). As James wrote in the New Testament, in the Father there is "no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (James 1:17). God will not compromise His holiness to meet us halfway; therefore, we must repent completely.

The opening word of John's message is "Repent!" (Matthew 3:2). The opening word of Jesus' ministry is "Repent!" (Matthew 4:17). The first demand by Peter in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost is "Repent!" (Acts 2:38). Obviously, we must approach God's kingdom through repentance.

Repentance is not a one-time thing, but is continual. When we sin, we are to confess our failure (1 John 1:9). If our hearts grow cold, we repent and return to our first works (Revelation 2:4, 5). The changes inside us must be continuing changes, as God patiently remakes us in His image (Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10). This side of Heaven, we will always need to repent.

Prayer - Our Father, we admit our weakness and sinfulness. Help us to change our hearts and mend our ways. May we always be a community of repentance, eager to hear Your voice and to follow Your will. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Thought to Remember - Make repentance a priority.