

# Repent!

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, do turn with me, if you would, to Matthew chapter 3. It will be a great help, I think, if you have that open before you. Whenever the world is forced into a confrontation with the one true and living God, made known in the person of Jesus Christ, whenever the world is forced into that confrontation, a crisis is provoked and a division is precipitated.

And that's true today, as it has been all throughout history. Last week, my paper on Thursday reported that there was the resignation of an award-winning producer at the BBC in protest, his protest, at the BBC's decision to show Jerry Springer the opera.

Anthony Pitts, a senior producer on Radio 3, said he felt the BBC had betrayed its founding principle to serve as a beacon of inspiration to the country.

Well, good for Anthony Pitts, I say. That is an example of the abiding truth. That when the real Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, is proclaimed for who he truly is, then there is always the eruption of a crisis, both in the public sphere and at the individual level, the personal level.

Why? Because a world that is in rebellion against its Maker and its Lord is confronted by its King. And its self-rule is being challenged by his rule.

[ 1 : 45 ] That's what's happening. And people are then forced out of the pretend world that they like to inhabit, where they suppress the truth and where they fool themselves.

They either say there's no God, or at least they have a God of their own fantasy, their own imagining. And they're forced out of that and confronted with the true God, the God of Scripture. The God made known in Jesus Christ. And so we shouldn't be surprised that at the great watershed in history, the great climactic moment of the Incarnation, where God himself becomes man in Jesus Christ, we shouldn't be surprised to see then, more clearly than ever, this confrontation and great crisis being provoked.

Remember over Christmas we've been looking at Matthew chapter 1 and 2, and we've already seen with great clarity that Matthew is telling us that the coming of Jesus brings to consummation, brings to its climax, the whole story of the Old Testament.

All the hopes of the law and the prophets are found in him. Jesus, he tells us, is the promised Messiah, the King who will reign forever on David's throne. He's the one who brings, at last, the climax to the promise to Abraham, that from Abraham's seed, all the nations of the world would be blessed through Jesus.

[ 3 : 09 ] And Matthew's saying, the King is here at last. He's here to gather all God's people under his rule. He's here to bring them into his kingdom forever. But now we see, as we get to chapter 3, Matthew's going to show us, that being confronted with the kingdom of God, being confronted with the rule of God, face on, is not quite what people expect.

It wasn't what the BBC expected at all, was it? When they decided to show that opera, that they would get 50,000 letters of protest, from Christian people. Why?

Well, because they didn't expect people to take Jesus all that seriously. That's why. Because the reality is, sadly, that the church so often is slow to take Jesus seriously.

They get away with all this sort of thing. But when people do, it provokes great surprise. And when Israel, when God's own people, were confronted by their King in the presence of Jesus Christ, they also were shocked, deeply shocked.

It wasn't at all what they expected. Why? Well, because just like all other people, even those people who do have the scriptures, like the peoples of the so-called Christian West, because they failed to take God really seriously.

[ 4 : 35 ] They made up their own image of God, a God of their own imaginings, who was a very comfortable God, a comfortable God, not a disturbing God.

That's a God that we tend to want, isn't it? But no, says Matthew, no, says John the Baptist, God is a coming King, He's a mighty ruler. And what's happening here with the coming of Jesus is the final showdown, the final confrontation with a people that have been, all through their history, reluctant to submit to the rule of God, through the prophets, through all his messengers, and through his word. And now is the time of final confrontation. And yes, it is a day of wonderful fulfillment. God is coming, as John says in verse 9, to raise up children for Abraham, yes.

But not according to the presumption of the Jews. He's going to do it, says John, through a great sitting, through a great judgment that will separate the true Israel from, well, from the false.

Verse 12, which is stark as that, the wheat from the chaff. So Matthew is making clear to us that the coming of Jesus is a great day, but it's also an awesome day.

[ 5 : 54 ] A passage this morning is all about that. It's all about being ready for that great and awesome day. And the scripture, you know, is very clear.

And that's why this is important for us today. Because the King, the Lord Jesus Christ, who once stood on the earth, will one day stand upon the earth again. The last day.

And every single human being will be confronted by him. And so Matthew's message is very pertinent and very acute for us today.

None of us know when we will be called to stand before him. I guess there were very few people on the beach in Phuket on Boxing Day morning who thought that that day they would be swept into eternity.

But they were. And so the question is, were they ready? Were they prepared for that day? Matthew, in these verses, draws our attention to John's message.

[ 7 : 01 ] And we'll look at this morning under three things that he makes clear to us. He gives us a messenger who proclaims. He tells us about his message that prepares. and about the Messiah who purges.

First of all, then, the messenger. John, Matthew tells us, is the messenger whose proclamation announces the coming of the Kingdom of God. Notice in verse 1 we're not given any introduction to John the Baptist.

It just launches into his ministry. If you read Luke's Gospel you find out all about his background, his birth, his beginnings. But Matthew doesn't give us any of that. There's just a sudden appearance of this man preaching.

And notice that all the emphasis in Matthew is not on his baptizing so much but on his message, his preaching, his proclamation. His message is simple. The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.

Literally, it means it's upon us. It's right here and now. It's got to be acted upon. Just like, I suppose, that tsunami which was spotted on the horizon minutes later was upon us.

[ 8 : 08 ] That's what he's saying. But it's a bit mysterious. Who is the messenger? Well, Matthew does actually tell us who he is. Not quite like Luke does by telling us about his background but by drawing our attention to two key allusions to the Old Testament Scriptures.

Remember, Matthew's very interested in telling us about fulfillment of the Old Testament. He does that again in verse 3. This is all about fulfillment of the Old Testament. He says, this is he who has spoken of by the prophet when he said, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.

Do you see what Matthew's saying? John is that voice. It's the well-known words of Isaiah 40. We read them at Christmas time. Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

It goes on to speak of the voice crying in the wilderness. And that voice is the voice that announces the coming day of the Lord, the day of salvation. In Isaiah, it's the exiles being told about their return that's going to come.

They're going to return from captivity back to the land, back to the city of Jerusalem. But as you read through Isaiah 40 to chapter 66, the last 26 chapters there of Isaiah, it's very clear that what the prophet is talking about is much, much more than just a return to the land.

[ 9 : 28 ] He's talking about a new exodus, a great redemption, out of the house of bondage. And this is going to be the last great exodus, the trexodus, the great redemption that all scripture has been pointing to.

The great exodus that even the exodus out of Egypt was only a shadow of. It's the exodus, the redemption of the way back to God from sin. If you read Isaiah chapter 43, don't read it now, but later on, chapter 43 verse 16, you'll see that the prophet says, look back to the old days and the old exodus.

Verse 18 says, but remember not before my sins, for hold on, I'm doing a new thing. Imagery is all about God leading his people in the new exodus through the wilderness.

And a leading of them right back to himself to be with him forever. He goes on to say, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake and I will not remember your sin.

You see, Isaiah's voice is the voice announcing the great day of deliverance where God will deal with sin forever. Where he will, through that, begin to usher in the new heavens and the new earth, the total reordering of creation.

[10:49] It's going to be the day, says Isaiah, when all flesh together, not just Israel, will see the glory of the Lord. If you read Isaiah chapter 56, you'll see that day is the day when all the foreigners will be gathered in as the people of Abraham.

If you read chapter 49, you'll see that it's God's servant who's going to bring salvation to the Gentiles, to all the nations of the earth. That's the great day of the Lord. And this, Matthew's telling us in verse 3, is that John is the voice that's announcing that great salvation.

The beginning of the end of all things, if you like. The great promise delivered from sin forever.

That's who this is. Look at verse 4, we get the second clue to John's identity.

It might seem strange, why on earth are you telling us about his clothes and diet? Well, anybody you see who knows the Old Testament will know immediately what Matthew's saying to us there.

The great prophet of the Old Testament was recognized just by these things, by his dress.

If you read 2 Kings chapter 1, verse 8, you're reading about the days of King Amaziah and some bad news was brought to him by one of his servants from a prophet of the Lord who hadn't told him his name.

[12:09] What kind of man was this? said the king. Well, he wore a garment of hair with a belt of leather. Ah, it's Elijah the Tishbite, said the king.

Everybody knows him. It was his trademark, his hallmark. Rather like saying, ah, well, I saw this man dressed in a pink suit with enormous great glasses. You say, well, it was from John. Or you say, well, it was this big man who used the F word all the time with curly hair and a red beard.

You say, well, that's Billy Conley. Oh, it's Elijah the Tishbite. Everybody knew. That's what he looked like. So Matthew's saying to us, look, this is Elijah the Tishbite.

What does that mean? Seems very strange, but it means a great deal. Just turn back a couple of pages in your Bible to Malachi chapter 4, the very last book of the Old Testament. He was one of the great prophetic hopes.

Malachi 4 verse 5, the very last prophetic word before the Old Testament closed. Behold, says the prophet, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.

[13:16] He will turn the hearts of their fathers to their children, the hearts of children to their fathers, as they come and strike the land through the decree of utter destruction. You see, one of the great hopes was that before that day of the Lord, it would be announced by a new Elijah.

And Matthew's saying, this is him. Now, if you have any doubts about that, read on to Matthew 11 verse 10 or Matthew 17 verse 10 where Jesus himself explicitly says, this was the Elijah that was to come.

Only you'll see it. You see, that's what explains verses 5 and 6 of our passage. The whole nation, the whole people surrounding, were going to confess their sin.

You see, Elijah was the great prophet who, just like John the Baptist, appeared suddenly in the midst of Israel in a day of great apostasy. Israel was at the absolute bottom.

It was the day of Ahab and Jezebel when they had institutionalized Baal worship as the official religion of Israel. You hardly got worse days in Israel than those days.

[14:24] And into that day appeared this Elijah, the prophet. And Elijah's message was simple. He constantly called the people of God back to the covenant.

Calling the people of God back away from their rebellion and from their idol worship and their transgression to the one true and living God. He called them to turn and repent.

Remember the story in 1 Kings 18? Mount Carmel and the great showdown between Elijah and the prophets of Baal? The people are to choose who is the real God.

The God who answers by fire. Who are you going to serve? Baal or the one true God? And Malachi you see prophesied that before the great day of the Lord a new Elijah would come.

Before that great awesome day there would be a new Elijah to proclaim the same message. Turn or perish. And Malachi says John is that one.

[ 15 : 33 ] He's the voice that proclaims the great day of salvation. But he's the Elijah who calls men and women to a verdict. Turn repent or perish.

Why that combination? We'll just turn back another page in Malachi to Malachi chapter 3. I think it makes it very clear. The messenger of the covenant will come chapter 3 verse 1 and I'll send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.

Behold he is coming says the Lord of hosts. But verse 2 who can endure the day of his coming? who can stand when he appears? Because he will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver and will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver and they will bring offerings and righteousness.

Verse 5 Then I will draw near to you for judgment says the Lord. You see this great day of the Lord, this great day of redemption says the prophet is going to be a day of fire.

fire. It's going to be a refining and a purifying fire to purge away the dross and the uncleanness and the sin. It's also going to be a fire of judgment.

[ 17 : 01 ] And that's why you see Elijah comes. That's why the very last verse of Malachi's prophecy says Elijah comes to announce the day of fire and to warn, to prepare, turn, so that the fire will refine you or perish in that fire.

And that brings then to John's message. And his message is that real repentance is the message that prepares for the coming kingdom.

Verse 2 you see, he says, the kingdom is upon us, the rule of God himself in the person of Jesus is upon you. So repent. Now, hang on a minute you see, surely the gospel is meant to be good news.

And this is all very negative, we don't like the sound of this. Surely, if it's the great day of the Lord, surely if it's the great day of salvation, the message shouldn't be repent, but rejoice. Is that right?

What happens to the rejoicing?

And that's very pertinent today, isn't it? Because we're in a day when we want a positive message.

We're always being told we mustn't give a negative message. We can't have all this negativity in the gospel, otherwise people won't come.

[ 18 : 21 ] So we've got a positive spin on everything. But John didn't appear to do that, did he? And you see, we're wrong. We don't want this kind of message about repentance.

Just as John's people didn't really want it, the reason is we've forgotten all about the seriousness of what the Bible calls sin. What is rebellion against our creator, against the ruler of this universe.

It doesn't bother us too much really, sin, you see, because we don't take it all that seriously. And we think, well, that sort of thing can always be dealt with by a bit of religion, a bit of going to church, a bit of going to church, well, perhaps even occasionally, a bit of giving to charity, a bit of doing some good works.

The Bible language for that was sacrifices and almsgiving and keeping rules and so on. So we don't see it's such a problem, it doesn't bother us all that much.

But you see, the problem is it does bother God. It bothers God an awful lot. In fact, it's the main problem for God. See, the Bible is very clear.

[ 19 : 37 ] The Bible tells us that sin bothers God an awful lot more than our lack of self-esteem bothers Him. It bothers an awful lot more than our loneliness does, or our feeling of unfulfillment in life, or all sorts of other things that we're very taken up with and are looking for an answer to.

These things may very well be, and often are the result of sin. But Matthew 1 and 21, remember, was very clear. You're going to call this child the name Jesus. Why?

Because He'll save His people from their sin. Not save them despite their sins, as though that didn't really matter, but from their sin.

In other words, by dealing with sin. And sin, according to the Bible, according to the prophets, is only dealt with by the refining and purifying fire of purging.

And that's what Malachi was talking about, you see, and Matthew picks up. Yes, this messenger of the covenant, this God that you delight in, He'll come. But you're going to get the shock of your life when He does come.

[ 20 : 51 ] Why? Well, because your minds are just full of fog. God's totally blinded to the reality. You're blinded to the fact that a holy God cannot stand in the presence of sin.

He cannot tolerate sin. And you're full of it. So when He comes, if He's going to save His people, if He's going to gather the nations to Himself, it must be by purging sin.

Or else, the same fire that refines and purges will also destroy. And that's what Matthew means in verse 10 when He said, the axe is about to draw near in judgment.

Or the fire is being kindled, it's about to burn everything up. And that was John's message to Israel as a nation. It was a call to national repentance. He was saying to them in the words of Malachi the prophet, repent, or be destroyed.

Turn, lest I strike the land with a decree of utter destruction. Lest, verse 12, it be burned in unquenchable fire. That was his message. And it really was a solemn word, wasn't it?

[ 22 : 03 ] Look at verse 7. It's about fleeing from the wrath to come. I don't think John would have got very far the popularity. He wouldn't have been the times preacher of the year.

But you see, sin and rebellion against God is something that's got to be dealt with. Because there is going to be judgment. The axe is swinging. That's what John's saying.

And what he's saying is, you've got to separate yourself from that realm of sin's power because that realm is going to be destroyed. You can't work out your own salvation.

Only God can save you from this judgment. So flee to him. Turn. Repent. That's what true repentance is. That's what John's message is all about. No, it's not a call to religion.

Get that into your heads. It's not a call to religion. In fact, it's quite the opposite. He's calling people in verse 9 to repent from religion. Don't presume your religion is going to save you.

[ 23 : 04 ] That's what he's saying to the Pharisees and Sadducees. Being the seed of Abraham according to the flesh, that's not enough. Don't presume that God's interested in your divine right of survival.

No, no, no. And by the way, that's just as true today. Somebody the other day was speaking about the Church of Scotland as though it had a divine right to survive.

The National Church, the inheritance of the Reformation and all the rest of it. But John's message is don't presume upon that. unless you repent, you will perish.

And we should take that very seriously too. We can say, well, we in St. George's Trong are an evangelical church. It's got a great heritage and a great history. We've held up the gospel. And John would say to us, don't presume your membership of St. George's Trong.

If you don't take God seriously, you too will perish. Remember, Revelation chapter 3, read those words from the mouth of the Lord Jesus Christ to the seven vibrant churches of Asia Minor.

[ 24 : 20 ] Ephesus, Smyrna, Thyatira and all these. Repent or I will remove your lampstand. You'll perish. Friends, you go to Asia Minor now and you'll count the number of believers on the fingers of your hands virtually.

those churches are gone. The same is true also for our nation. Our nation state today is not like the nation of Israel, a favored, chosen vehicle of God's rule.

But, Western Christendom of all the places on the earth has been a privileged part of the world. We have had the gospel and the truth of God for millennia.

And now we appear to be in a wholesale rejection of the rule of God and Europe in particular.

John's message is very clear.

Repent or I will strike the entire land with a curse. But, you see, notice in what John is saying here that national repentance begins with a challenge to the hearts of individuals to repent.

[ 25 : 32 ] Verse 5 tells us all the nation was going to. In verse 6, he says that each one is called to confess their sins. They were all confessing their own sins. They were all repenting.

What is this repentance he's talking about? Well, it is a change of mind. It's a total change in outlook when we grasp the meaning of God's rule. But it's more than that. It leads to a change of heart that people were confessing their sins.

They confessed their need of salvation. They understood that they couldn't do it themselves. It's a turning of the heart, verse 9, away from presumption and to penitence.

Verse 8, don't presume. Throw yourself upon God. And it's a truth of life in verse 8. He's calling them to show fruit in keeping with repentance.

Not just an outward thing. You see, these Pharisees and Sadducees, these religious professionals were coming. We're not sure if they were actually baptized or they were just coming to watch. But

whatever it was, John's saying to them, not an outward thing I'm interested in.

[ 26 : 34 ] Is it real? Is it in your heart? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. You see, unless you really do think you're a sinner, you can't repent.

What was it Jesus said? It's the sick who need a doctor, not the healthy. And the challenge to these religious people is to see that they too needed to repent.

And the problem was, for them, that they didn't really see that because they had a sentimental view of God. They didn't understand the seriousness of sin. But you see, the God of the Bible is not sentimental.

The God of the Bible is a God whose salvation is from wrath and judgment. It's a gospel about a saviour who comes to save by fire. He comes to save by a fire that purges from sin or else destroys and devours sin.

That brings us to the final point in Matthew's message here, that he focuses for us. His message is all about preparing people for the Messiah. And Jesus, says John, is the Messiah whose purging fire inaugurates, brings in his kingdom to the world.

[ 27 : 53 ] God. Sometimes people find verses 11 and 12 a bit confusing and difficult. One reason is that they've taken this phrase, baptism in the Holy Spirit, out of its context and started to use it in other ways and gain other associations, special experiences or this kind of thing.

If we look at these verses here in context, it's very clear. That's not at all what he's talking about.

Look at it. Verse 11. John is quite clear saying that he and his own message is preparatory.

He's all pointing to the one who comes after him. He is mightier than I, he says. He is to be the real baptiser. My baptism is just cold and wet.

It's just a symbol, he's saying. That he, he'll baptise with warmth and vitality of the fire of life. He's the true one.

He'll baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire. Now he's not saying there that these are two distinct things. All through the Bible the Spirit of God is represented by fire. Just think of the many encounters with God that we read of in the Old Testament.

[ 29 : 04 ] So Abraham, Genesis 15, the great encounter when God makes the covenant with him. What do we read? Through the pieces of the body parts that were cut went a smoking fire pot and a burning torch.

Representing God. What about Moses when he met with God? Where was it? At a burning bush being consumed by fire. Or just think about Israel in the wilderness. Wherever they went, God was with them how?

In a pillar of fire. And John is saying that this baptism of fire that Jesus is going to bring is the ultimate encounter with the living God.

What all these things pointed to. Do you remember the hope of the prophets again and again about the new covenant? God is going to be marked by a pouring out of the spirit of God from above. Ezekiel 39, pouring out his spirit on Israel. Ezekiel 36, pouring out cleansing of the sprinkling of clean water. Or Isaiah 44 and 3, I'll pour out water on a thirsty land.

[ 30 : 07 ] Or as Peter quotes in the day of Pentecost from Joel 2, he's going to pour out his spirit on all flesh. Another metaphor that the prophets used in exactly the same way is the metaphor of fire.

So Isaiah 4 and 4 says that God is going to wash away the filth through a spirit of judgment and of burning. Washing by fire, water and fire.

Or as we read in Malachi chapter 3 about a purging fire. And what Matthew is saying is this is the promise of pouring of the fire of life. It's the fire that cleanses and purges and renews God's people forever.

It's the fire that gives them a new heart. It's the fire that gives them a new mind. It's the fire that confers upon them the righteousness that the law could never give.

Do you remember the cleansing of the lips of Isaiah the prophet in Isaiah chapter 6 by the coal from out of the fire that cleansed him? And this, John's saying, is this is that poured out now upon all the world?

[ 31 : 15 ] And John's saying he and he alone is going to do this. He will baptise with the spirit. And this outpouring from above, this flooding, this drenching that brings forgiveness and cleansing in life, as promised, there's going to be his work.

That's what he's coming to do. And so you see there's no separation ever, ever in scripture between the work of the Holy Spirit and the work of the Lord Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection and

ascension.

The baptism of the Holy Spirit is being overwhelmed by an encounter with the living God in and through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross.

That's what baptism in the spirit is. Jesus says in Luke 12 and 49, I've come to bring fire to you. He says it comes through his baptism he's to be baptised with, meaning his death.

And that's what John says the Messiah's work is, to baptise with I, to plunge everyone. Notice in verse 11, you will all, it's you plural, you will all be baptised into an ultimate overwhelming encounter with the living God.

[ 32 : 33 ] Everyone will be confronted with the final revelation of God in the person of Christ and with the ultimate redemption of God in the work of Christ.

And verse 12 simplifies and explains what that baptism of all will mean, what the cross of Jesus accomplishes. Very clear, isn't it? It will be a work of unmistakable, undeniable, ultimate division. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. See what he's saying, the cross of Jesus Christ touches every single human being, whoever lived and whoever will live.

And in that respect, the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ is universal in its scope, but it's in two directions. Look at verse 12.

On the one hand, the baptism of fire accomplished in the work of Christ will be refining and purifying. It will be a life-giving blaze of life. It will bring to life what is cold and dead by sin.

[ 33 : 49 ] He will gather his wheat into his barn. Romans 5, he poured his love into our hearts by his Holy Spirit, bringing the dead to life.

But on the other hand, when it's resisted, when it's scorned, when it's refused, through an arrogant refusal to repent, through a refusal to bow the knee to the one true living God made known in Jesus Christ, well then that same fire will be to them a destroying fire.

The chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. And that was John's message to Israel. He proclaimed the coming kingdom, he prepared for the kingdom through a message of repentance because he pointed to a Messiah who was going to come with purging fire.

And friends, his message was fulfilled in history for the people of Israel. On the one hand, that life-giving fire did come. He raised up children for Abraham from among the Jews and among the Gentiles.

And on the day of Pentecost, what happened? From heaven, the fire fell and every living believer in the whole cosmos was baptized in the Holy Spirit fire. The life of the Lord Jesus Christ purging their sins and drawing them to life.

[ 35 : 19 ] But on the other hand, for the mass of unbelieving Israel as a nation, who rejected, refused to repent, well in AD 70, the nation was purged by the ravaging, destroying fire of the legions of Rome.

Jerusalem was flattened, the temple destroyed, and the fire burned. You see, the death of Jesus in history lit a mighty conflagration.

It built a fire that's been burning ever since. And that fire still burns today. It burns all over the world, everywhere, the gospel message of Jesus Christ is heard.

How is that? Well, just as Elijah's message was a message to turn, to repent, and just as John's message was a message to return and repent, so the same message is the message of the gospel today.

Do you remember Jesus said, John the Baptist was the greatest prophet, he was the greatest man ever born of woman. Do you remember he went to say, yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he?

[ 36 : 30 ] Why is that? Well, because our message is that the promise of John, his message was fulfilled, it was accomplished, the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And that's why Paul says that we too, as believers, are messengers, like John, messengers of the new covenant, heralds of the coming kingdom, with a message of preparation, a message of preparation for the last day, for that day when there will be finally and ultimately and forever a great sifting of the wheat and the chaff.

And wherever the gospel message, the message about Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection and ascension is preached, wherever that is heard, men and women are confronted by the baptizer, the baptizer with fire, fire and they're plunged into an encounter with him and with his fire.

