

The Ax Is At the Root

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[0 : 00] We are in Matthew chapter 3 this morning. We have been going through a sermon series in the Gospel of Matthew. We started it in Advent, and we're going to go straight, go right through the rest of the book now that Christmas is past.

So we're in Matthew chapter 3. And my name is Sean, for those of you who don't know me. It's my privilege and joy to preach God's word to you this morning.

Let me pray for the reading and preaching of God's word. Heavenly Father, your word in Matthew 3 has a sobering message for us.

Won't you help us to be alert physically, spiritually, to the urgency of repentance and faith in Jesus. Won't you cast down any fleshly confidence and false assurances that we presume upon and cling to.

[1 : 31] And fix our eyes and all of our hopes solely on Jesus Christ, your son, our king, Allah. Speak to us.

You promise the baptism in the Holy Spirit and fire for those who repent and believe.

So, Lord, fill us more and more with your Holy Spirit and make those who are not yet born again, born again, baptize in your spirit.

Even this morning. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. If you are able, please stand so that we can honor God as we read his word.

I will be reading out loud from Matthew 3, verses 1 to 12. In those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea.

[2 : 45] Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.

Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Bear fruit in keeping with repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father. For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.

Even now, the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

[4 : 02] I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 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.

This is God's holy and authoritative word. You may be seated. Earlier this month, Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian dictator, was overthrown in a military coup and fled to Moscow.

Some of you may have read that in the news. He and his father, who preceded him, ruled Syria under a brutal dictatorship for five decades. And when the victorious rebel group took over Damascus, thousands of Syrians stormed the capital to celebrate while also dismantling various statues of those former dictators and defacing their posters.

However, not everyone celebrated when that happened. The Alawites, which is a Muslim minority sect that makes up about 10% of Syria, supported Bashar al-Assad because Assad was himself an Alawite.

[5 : 34] The majority of Syria's military and political elites, including their intelligence agencies and their paramilitaries, were all made up of Alawites.

But now that there has been a regime change, these Alawites are fearing for their safety. They fear retribution, and they're calling for amnesty, for a general pardon and forgiveness of all political offenses that took place in the previous regime.

Because one's fortunes can change overnight when there is a regime change, and it matters which side you're on. Matthew 3, 1-12 is a warning about a regime change that is underway.

2 Corinthians 4-4 describes Satan as the God of this world, and we can see why in this next chapter in the Gospel of Matthew, when the devil offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their glory.

Because under God's sovereign rule, Satan for a time has been allowed this authority on earth. As Matthew 12, 26 makes clear, Satan too has a kingdom, and this world is ruled, as Ephesians 2, 2 says, by this prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.

[7 : 00] But Satan and his kingdom will eventually be destroyed and give way to the kingdom of God, to the consummation of the kingdom of God. And John the Baptist announces in this passage that that regime change, which will in the future be consummated, is already afoot, has already begun, because Christ the King has come.

And so that's the main point of my message this morning, is repent, for Christ the King has come. Repent means turn. It says in Acts 26, 20, repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with repentance.

It means you do a U-turn from living for yourself to living for God, from living under the dominion of Satan to living under the dominion of Jesus Christ.

It means you do a turn from living for your selfish, sinful desires to obeying God from the heart. And this message is urgent.

This message is urgent because regime change is already afoot. Repent for Christ the King has come. And there are two reasons that Matthew gives us in this passage, because the kingdom is at hand, and secondly, because judgment is at hand, both brought by, ultimately, the Messiah.

[8 : 21] We were told at the end of chapter two that Jesus grew up in Nazareth, which is why he's called the Nazarene. Some time has now elapsed since that time, and Jesus is an adult, as you will see later in this chapter.

He says in verse one, in those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea. Matthew includes the detail that John's preaching ministry took place in the wilderness of Judea, and this is not an incidental detail.

Matthew is making the theological claim that John is the voice of one crying in the wilderness, as prophesied in Isaiah 40, verse three, which he quotes later in verse three.

The wilderness has marked very important transitional seasons in the history of God's people. If you remember, it was in the wilderness that God first appeared to Moses and appeared to his people on Mount Sinai.

It was in the wilderness, to the wilderness, that God led his people out of the exodus in Egypt. It was in the wilderness that people journeyed until they arrived and conquered the promised land that God had promised to give them.

[9 : 33] And so many of the prophets employed the imagery of God turning the wilderness into paradise because that's what God time and time again did in redemptive history.

Isaiah 43, verse 19 says, Behold, I am doing a new thing. Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it? I will make in the wilderness and rivers in, I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

Isaiah 44, verse three, For I will pour water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground. I will pour out my spirit upon your offspring and my blessing on your descendants. So when you see wilderness, in short, it's already, it's a place of transition, a place of promise, a place of anticipation. So when you hear wilderness, regime change, the smell of regime change is in the air. God is about to break in and establish his rule among his people.

That there is a new prophet in town is already newsworthy. That he is preaching in the wilderness is already newsworthy. But what takes center stage here in this passage is not who John is or where he is, but what he says.

[10 : 47] He is preaching, which is even more important than his baptizing. He says in verse one, John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea. And this is what he preached.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. And this is not just the message of the previous era because it's the exact same message that Jesus preaches later in the gospel of Matthew in Matthew 4, 17.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. We need to turn away from sin and turn toward Jesus in faith. Why? For, because, the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

As the regime changes, you must pledge allegiance to the right king. The word kingdom in the Bible doesn't primarily refer to a place or a territory or a realm like when we speak of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which is I think the official name of the country.

It rather refers to a dominion, to the kingship and the rulership of someone when it speaks of kingdom. And so, when it says that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, what it means is the king of heaven has begun his rule.

[12:02] The king of heaven is taking charge. Of course, there is a sense in which God has always reigned over all the earth. He is the sole creator and Lord of all the heavens and the earth.

However, the Bible always acknowledges that the world is not the way it's supposed to be. Ever since the fall of humanity, there has been rebel forces at work in this world who resist God's rule. That's why in Zechariah 14, 5-9, it prophesied of the day of the Lord saying, then the Lord my God will come and all the holy ones with him. On that day, living water shall flow out from Jerusalem and the Lord will be king over all the earth.

On that day, the Lord will be one and his name one. What does it mean that the Lord will be king over all the earth? He already is king over all the earth, but he will be king over all the earth in the sense that he will subdue all the rebel forces and bring all under his submission and rule.

What does it mean that on that day, the Lord will be one and his name one? The Lord God is already one, but on that day, all peoples will be brought under the one name of God and every knee will bow and every tongue will confess.

[13:20] And so that's what it means here, that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, that the king of heaven has come. But Matthew is also unique in speaking of the kingdom of heaven rather than the more typical kingdom of God, which is the expression that Mark, Luke, and John prefer to use.

Matthew, however, prefers to use kingdom of heaven even though he does on occasion use the expression kingdom of God and I think that's because he wants to emphasize that the kingdom that God brings about is not an earthly kingdom in contrast to the expectations of many of his fellow Jews, but rather it's a heavenly kingdom.

And God is the one who rules in heaven. God is described as the God in heaven throughout the Old Testament and so it's Matthew saying that God for heaven himself will reign as king over his people.

This expression kingdom of heaven is related also to another peculiar Matthew expression. It's the father in heaven, which is a common phrase for us.

God is never called the father in heaven in the gospels of Luke and John. He is only called the father in heaven once in the gospel of Mark, but in Matthew he's called father in heaven 14 times.

[14:41] And how were we taught to pray to God in Matthew 6 by Jesus? Our father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

In short, when God's rule and kingship begin to take effect on earth as it is in heaven, that's when the kingdom of heaven has come.

And when exactly is that going to happen? In the distant future. No, it says, the kingdom of heaven is at hand. That's a translation of a word that means to draw near, but it's in the perfect tense.

If the word were in the present tense, we translate as the kingdom of heaven is drawing near, that it's approaching, but that it's still in the future. That's how we would translate it. But if it's in the perfect tense, we translate it as the kingdom of heaven has drawn near, meaning it has already come.

It's not consummated yet. It's not completed yet, but it has already begun. God's reign has already begun. We know that from the parallel expression in Matthew 26, when Jesus says that the hour of his betrayal is at hand, that the hour of his betrayal has drawn near, and immediately in the following verse, Judas approaches and betrays Jesus.

[16:09] What Jesus is saying here is that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, meaning it's already here, and that's such an amazing thing to think about. Because God's people have been waiting for hundreds of years through exile and through pain and through oppression and through sin, waiting for the Messiah, the king, to come and deliver them.

And John comes on the scene and starts saying, the kingdom of heaven has drawn near. It is at hand. I wanted to try to capture this excitement for you guys, and I was trying to think about what would be the best way to do that.

I was thinking of a modern analogy, and the only thing I could think of was these trailer reaction videos that I saw of when the Star Wars rise of Skywalker came out.

Have you guys seen this movie or have seen any of these trailers? I have not seen the movie, but I have seen the trailer reaction video. and this is a, I've learned recently, thanks to John's in particular, that Star Wars, not John the Baptist, John Buckley, that Star Wars has a rabid fan base. And in 2019, so every year, they have a Star Wars celebration. Do you guys know this? Every year. And in 2009, the Star Wars celebration was held in 2019 in Chicago, and this gathered an estimated 65,000 fans.

[17:36] 65,000 fans gathered just to celebrate Star Wars. And when they showed the teaser trailer for the Rise of Skywalker for the first time, you can see on camera the reactions of tens of thousands of people there, and especially honing in, focusing in on people who were particularly expressive.

And it's really something to watch. They are rubbing their hands in excitement. They're bobbing up and down. And there's collective gasps throughout the stadium.

They're covering their mouths with their hands in amazed disbelief. Their eyes are wide with wonder. And there's spontaneous cheers. And then at the end of it, they celebrate by jumping up and down at the end.

And in that reaction video, grown men with beards hyperventilate and cry. I'm not trying to mock you if you're one of those people.

Because they've spent years waiting for that movie to come out, longing to satisfy their nostalgia and to fulfill their epic fantasies.

[18:59] And it's finally here. And they can't help but cry. Isn't it sad that people get more excited about the coming of the Rise of Skywalker, the movie, than the second coming of Jesus sometimes?

If people can get that excited about the movie, think about the palpable excitement in the air and the anticipation of this momentous announcement that the kingdom of heaven is not in some distant future.

It is here. It's at hand. It has drawn near. The long-awaited king has come. And Matthew tells us that we can trust John's announcement because he quotes Isaiah 40, verse 3, in verse 3 of this passage.

For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Isaiah had prophesied that there would be a herald that precedes the coming of the Lord. And he will cry out in the wilderness. That's why John's there. Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.

[20:15] When a king of old marched out anywhere, there would always be heralds and guards that precede. And they would go out before him. They would open all the gates and open all the doors and they would clear out the streets and make people move out of the way, move things that are in the way, out of the way, clear the streets, say, make way for the king because it does not befit the dignity of a king to jostle through a crowd and to be pushed to and fro.

So the herald goes before him to announce the coming of the king to prepare the way of the Lord. And that's how John views himself in relation to Jesus as a servant and a herald of the king, as a stagehand who works backstage to get the set ready so that the lead actor can come to the scene. Matthew concurs with John's assessment because even though John was prophesied of in scripture, as verse 3 makes clear, Matthew intentionally does not use the fulfillment formula that he always uses when speaking of how Jesus fulfilled the scriptures.

The word fulfill and its variation is used 15 times to speak of the scriptures being fulfilled in the gospel of Matthew and every single time it refers to Jesus and no one else.

This confirms what Ed said in his sermon last week that Jesus is the only expected person. Jesus, not John, even though he was prophesied of.

[21:52] Jesus, not John, is the promised one. Jesus, not John, is the expected one. Jesus, not John, is the coming one who fulfills the scriptures. Jesus.

But we must not be fooled into thinking that John was a nobody. He's actually quite important. Look at verse 4. Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist and his food was locusts and wild honey.

Why does Matthew take a sudden interest in John's clothing preferences and diet? The Bible seldom notes what people are wearing so this detail is important.

There was another prophet in history who dressed just like John. 2 Kings 1.8 says that Elijah wore a garment of hair with a belt of leather about his waist.

And Elijah, too, was associated with the wilderness and with the Jordan where John is baptizing. Elijah is arguably the greatest prophet of the Old Testament.

[23 : 02] That's why as the fountainhead of the prophets, I guess he appears alongside Moses representing the prophets and the law at Jesus' transfiguration later in the gospel.

And moreover, it was prophesied in Malachi 4.5, Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord.

So the messenger that comes to prepare the way for the Lord was expected to be a second Elijah.

In fact, later in Matthew 17, Jesus himself confirms that John the Baptist is that prophesied Elijah.

And Jesus says this about John the Baptist in Matthew 11.11, that among those born of woman, there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.

Isn't that something to hear from Jesus? In other words, under the old covenant, before Jesus established the new covenant and poured out his spirit among his people, John the Baptist is the greatest of all human beings who ever lived in God's estimation.

[24 : 19] He's the goat. He's the goat. And he was popular. He says in verses 5-6, Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him and they were baptized by him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins.

People are thronging to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan and they're listening, paying attention to him and they're getting baptized by him.

Josephus, who was a first century Roman Jewish historian, independently says this about John in one of his books. Now when many others came in crowds about John, for they were very greatly moved by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion, for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise, thought it best by putting him to death to prevent any mischief he might cause and not bring himself into difficulties.

John was so popular and so influential that he put King Herod on notice. His crowds were flocking to him and hanging on his every word. People openly wondered, as you see in the Gospel of John, whether he might be the Christ, the Messiah.

He is the greatest of all prophets in the Old Covenant. But look at what he says in verse 11. I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry.

[25 : 59] He will baptize you with Holy Spirit and fire. This is an amazing, shocking statement. Shoes are filthy things in general, right?

If you walk around Cambridge enough, you've stepped on all kinds of dirt and pigeon poop and dog poop, right? But in the ancient Near East, shoes are even filthier because it's a desert climate, it's hot, people's feet get sweaty, and it's old streets where not just people and vehicles, but all kinds of animals are roaming the streets and dropping their excrements.

Sandals, open-toed sandals, caked in dirt that require daily feet washing. So imagine these filthy sandals, they're so dirty that Jewish rabbinical teaching says this, every service which a slave performs for his master, every service which a slave performs for his master shall a disciple do for his teacher except the losing of sandal thongs.

So everything that a slave does for his master, a student should do to his teacher is what the Jews are saying. You should bring him water, you should serve him, you should attend to him, you should listen to him, you should do everything like a slave to his master except taking their sandals.

That's too lowly even for the teacher and even for the student. Only a slave should do that. And yet John singles out that particular humiliating act and says that he is not worthy to do that for the coming Messiah.

[27 : 49] Imagine a guest coming into your house, plopping down on a seat and then sticking one of his foot out expecting you to remove the shoes and carry it off somewhere.

What would you do? You'd probably stare them down and say, go take your own shoes off. And then in your mind you're probably cursing their insolence and arrogance.

but imagine when that happened instead of responding that way you knelt down with your head bowed in shame and said I'm not worthy to remove those sandals.

that's what John is doing here. John is a humble man but if all we do is marvel at John's humility here then we're missing the point of this passage.

If I make John the focus of my sermon then John himself would be unhappy because that's precisely the opposite of what John does here. The point of this passage is not John's humility it is Jesus' glory.

[29 : 29] John's saying that he's not worthy to carry Jesus' soiled sandals that's not exaggerated false humility that's the cold hard fact because he is not worthy to carry Jesus' sandals.

But how can someone be unworthy to carry someone's dirty sandals? If you actually turn to Isaiah 40 verse 3 which Matthew quotes in verse 3 I think I have that to show and you look at the full context and it is original setting he says this in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Who is John making the way for? it's God. You'll notice that the word Lord is in all caps which means it's not the word for Lord that means master but rather the proper noun the name for God in the Old Testament Yahweh.

Isaiah prophesied that John would prepare the way not for some mere mortal only but for God himself.

This is a remarkable Christological claim because Matthew is saying that that God is Jesus God in human flesh the divine king.

[31 : 08] John calls Jesus the one who is coming after me. In verse 11 later in Matthew 11 through John calls Jesus the one who is to come. You might recognize that phrase from the book of Revelation which we were in not that long ago.

This expression the one who is to come is laden with theological meaning. 20th century theologian G.R. Beasley Murray entitled one of his books The Coming of God because the coming of God to save his people is one of the major themes of the Bible and his coming to his people is always associated with his kingship.

He says in Deuteronomy 33 verses 2-5 The Lord came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us. Thus the Lord became king in Jeshurun when the heads of the people were gathered all the tribes of Israel together.

It's because God came to rule over his people that he became king over them. Similarly he says in Psalm 96 verses 10-13 Say among the nations the Lord reigns.

Why do we say that the Lord reigns? For he comes. For he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the people in his faithfulness.

[32 : 19] Isaiah 40 verse 10 Behold the Lord God comes with might and his arm rules for him. Malachi 3 1 Behold I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight.

Behold he is coming. Over and over and over again God is described in the scriptures as the one who comes because our God is not a God who stays at a distance spectating with his arms crossed but God who intervenes the God who comes to save to judge to deliver to reign among his people. That's why Jesus is Emmanuel God with us. And because Jesus is the one who is and who was and is to come because Jesus is the king of the kingdom of heaven, John is right to herald Jesus' coming and then get out of the way.

Do you know that Christ the king has come? Do you relate to Christ the king rightly as John does? Have you pledged your allegiance to Jesus as his loyal subject? Have you submitted every aspect of your life to him? If we think about it, we give mere mortals, sinful human beings more respect than we give to God sometimes.

[34 : 20] The quality of attention we commit to God, the amount of space we devote to God in our thoughts and in our hearts and our affections, the degree of reverence that we pay to God, the extent of obedience that we give to God, make a sad mockery of the surpassing glory and worth of God the king.

How different our lives would be if we just grasped this truth of how transcendent and how glorious our king really is.

How much more grateful we would be. How much less grumbling there would be. Consider the examples of the apostles in the book of Acts, in Acts 5:41, they are unfairly arrested and then unfairly tried and then beaten for proclaiming Jesus, but they don't complain to God saying, you know, God, I've been so faithful to you, I think I deserve a little better than that.

No, it says that when they were released, they left the presence of the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer this honor for this name of Jesus.

How do you respond like that to suffering and persecution? Because they knew the surpassing worth of Jesus. They knew that they were not worthy to carry Jesus' sandals, so they rejoiced to get to do anything for Jesus.

[36:10] They rejoiced to suffer this honor for the name of Jesus. What about you? Of course, everybody wants to do glorious and spectacular and honorable and great things for God.

Even unbelievers do that. Some of them. Paul said there are some who preach the gospel for selfish gain. But are you willing to suffer this honor for Jesus' sake?

are you willing to be ridiculed and ostracized for him? To be marked in your workspace and your school as that crazy evangelical?

are you willing to associate with difficult hard to love people for his sake? Are you willing to be the least and the last for Jesus' name's sake?

Are you willing to take backstage instead of center stage for Jesus' sake? Are you willing to be forgotten for his name's sake? Are you willing to be misunderstood and disliked for Jesus' sake?

[37:39] Are you willing to be poor for Jesus' sake? Are you willing to do what he wants you to do rather than do what you want to do? Are you willing if he gives you the honor to do so, to carry his sandals?

if that's all you got to do in life?

I'm a small man, might not get to do much for God in this life, but if I can carry his sandals for the rest of my life. we must repent because the kingdom is at hand, but also because judgment is at hand.

He says in verse 7, but when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees were the two dominant Jewish religious sects at that time. They together made up the Sanhedrin, which is the highest ruling class, basically the legal and political authority, religious authorities among the Jews.

[39:16] But these Sadducees and the Pharisees, they were at loggerheads with each other. They didn't really like each other. They disagreed on many theological issues to paint them in very broad strokes.

The Sadducees were the religious liberals of their day. They were the academic and political elites. They were in cahoots with the Roman government. They argued that there is no resurrection and no angels, no spirits.

But the Pharisees, who were the religious conservatives of the day, believed in all those things. And they preached strict adherence to the Old Testament law. They were the constitutional originalists of their day.

They sought to purge and to purify the Jewish people. All that to say they didn't get along. And you can see that throughout the Gospels and the book of Acts.

But when you find the Sadducees and the Pharisees making common cause to oppose someone, that's bad news. And that's what you see here.

[40:23] And that's what you see again later in chapter 16 when they come together to test Jesus. So notice it doesn't say that they came to John to get baptized.

They came to his baptism. They're on a surveillance mission. They're watching him, assessing him. Maybe they're curious to see what John has to say.

His message about repentance, purification may have resonated with the Pharisees somewhat. But we know that they were unrepentant from John's response.

And John chastises them severely. He says, you brood of vipers who warned you to flee from the wrath to come. Vipers are venomous snakes.

And the point of this comparison is that these Jewish religious leaders are full of deadly poison. Snakes are scary, right? I mean, most of us are afraid of snakes.

[41 : 28] There's good reason for that. If you don't count mosquitoes who spread diseases that kill humans but don't actually kill humans themselves, snakes are still to this day the animal that kills the most human beings.

it's the deadliest animal to humans. These religious leaders were like them. Jesus also will later call them twice in the gospel of Matthew brood of vipers because they were hypocrites and they shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces.

they spewed out their poison with their deadly deceptive words and they plotted to kill Jesus. And so John describes them as a brood of poisonous snake hatchlings that are slithering away at the coming disaster.

Maybe when you fell a tree with an axe and it falls to their habitat, they slither away or maybe there's a fire that breaks out and then these snakes slither away and that's how John describes these Sadducees and the Pharisees.

he warns them in verses 8 and 9, bear fruit in keeping with repentance and do not presume to say to yourselves we have Abraham as our father for I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.

[42 : 48] The Pharisees and the Sadducees were not repentant because and we know that because they bore no fruit in keeping with repentance. they had not turned back from their sins.

They did not have deeds that showed that they were truly repentant. I often use this analogy when I speak of repentance. Imagine that your friend is giving you a ride and you are using the GPS to navigate for him and you're giving him directions and then he takes a wrong turn and so he needs to do you turn and so you tell your friend hey you gotta turn around.

There's no way to get there another way. You need to do a U-turn and then your friend says oh okay thanks and then he keeps driving the same way. What would you do?

You would be totally justified in wondering whether your friend heard you or not. Hey did you hear what I said? You have to turn around or you will never get there.

because if he really heard and if he really believed what you said he would have turned around.

[44 : 08] Similarly someone who turns back from their sins and turns toward God will start walking in a different direction.

by this I don't mean that you never sin again. Sure we take wrong turns here and there but the fundamental direction of the person's life has been reoriented.

They're not going the same way anymore. That's repentance. The Pharisees and the Sadducees did not repent. Their confidence lay instead on a presumption.

We have Abraham as our father. Because of their Jewish ethnic heritage they presumed that they were safe. We are the chosen people of God. We are the people of the promise.

God will never abandon us. Don't you know? God always keeps his promises. But they did not remember that in all of biblical history God always saves a faithful remnant.

[45 : 16] only the remnant of Noah's family was saved from the flood judgment. Not all of the offspring of Abraham but only the line of Isaac inherited the promise.

Only the remnant of Caleb and Joshua entered the promised land. After God's people were exiled Isaiah named one of his sons Shir Jashub which means a remnant shall return.

He prophesied that while the tree of faithless Israel has fallen that there still remains a trunk of the tree that is faithful a remnant. Micah referred to God's people as the remnant of Jacob.

Jeremiah prophesied that when the Messiah comes he will gather the remnant of his flock. It is for all these reasons that Paul concludes in Romans 9.8 it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God but the children of the promise that are counted as offspring.

The physical national identity of the Jews has always been subordinated to their spiritual identity. It is the spiritual children of God who are the remnant true Israel.

[46 : 31] That is why Jesus warns the Jews later in Matthew 21.43 John's warning here in verse 10 is urgent.

Even now the axe is laid at the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Do you hear that axe at the root of the tree?

If you have not repented it is urgent that you hear that sound of the axe at the root of the tree, thud. Thud. Thud.

Judgment is at hand. Don't ever presume that you are safe just because of your spiritual pedigree or your family background. Such false assurances abound today among Christians also.

How many times have you heard words like this? I've been going to church all my life. My parents and great parents, grandparents are Christians.

[47 : 46] My dad's a pastor. I lead worship at my church. I'm baptized. Everyone who knows me thinks I'm a mature Christian.

I don't remember a time when I wasn't a Christian. None of that matters. What matters is that you have truly repented of your sins and trusted in Jesus Christ for your salvation.

Have you done that? Are you bearing fruit in keeping with repentance or is there unrepentant sin in your life? Verse 6 teaches us that the people coming to be baptized by John were confessing their sins.

That's an essential aspect of repentance. Is there unconfessed sin in your life? Have you taken steps to turn away from that sin or are you still hiding and abetting that sin?

Locking, marching, and lockstep with that sin still. Guys, I might not know it, but in every church there are people who are doing that.

[49 : 03] That's why this is so urgent. Judgment is at hand. And the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God.

This is the reason why we are a credo Baptist church. I'm going to a little bit of theology and baptism here, so stay with me. Credo baptism means believer's baptism as opposed to paedo-baptism, which is infant baptism.

Because Colossians 2 makes the connection between the circumcision of Christ and being buried with Christ in baptism, some sincere Christians, many of whom I respect, argue that we should baptize infants in a same way that the Israelites circumcised their male infants.

They see baptism as a sign of the covenant community and that babies too can be a part of that. However, in that passage in Colossians 2, Paul does not connect Christian baptism to Jewish circumcision.

He connects Christian baptism to the circumcision of Christ, which he explicitly says is not made with hands. In Ephesians 2, 11-12, Paul explicitly says that circumcision in the flesh made by hands is obsolete.

[50 : 31] And John the Baptist here makes it very clear to the Pharisees and the Sadducees that they cannot presume to enter the kingdom of heaven just because they were born a Jew.

just because you had Abraham as their father. He says God is able from stones, from inanimate dead stones to raise up children for Abraham.

How much more than can God make children of Abraham out of Gentiles and out of all the nations? I think the argument here is compelling.

that your ethnic or biological, physical heritage, inheritance is no credit or merit to anybody for salvation.

Everyone needs to be converted. Even all the Jews need to repent of their sins. This is demonstrated in a remarkable way by John here baptizing Jews.

[51 : 35] He says in verse 5 that people came from Jerusalem and all the region around the Jordan. these are all Jewish regions. The people who are coming to him are Jewish, at least the vast majority of them.

Now, and some historians, this is not certain, but some historians think that John's practice of baptizing people like this once is related to the Jewish practice of proselyte baptism, where they take Gentiles who come and say, I want to be a Jew, and they baptize them as they convert to Judaism.

It's possible that John's baptism preceded it. I don't think anybody knows for sure. But even if it is related to Jewish proselyte baptism, what he is doing here is a radical departure from that practice because in Jewish proselyte baptism, you never baptize Jews.

Jews don't need to be baptized. It's the Gentiles that need to be baptized. But here is John baptizing throngs after throngs of Jews to make the provocative point that all people, Jews or Gentiles, must repent for Christ the King has come.

This is why repentance is always tied with baptism in the Bible. Acts 2.38, when Peter is preaching at Pentecost, he said, repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

[53 : 11] You cannot have true, genuine baptism apart from repentance. So John also says in verse 11, I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. For those who truly repent of their sins and believe in Jesus, and for those who are baptized as an outward profession of their inward faith, God promises this wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit.

This is not something that John the Baptist can give, or a pastor or any other church leader can give anyone. It is God's prerogative alone.

That is why John says that only the coming one who is mightier than he can baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire. It is the individual's responsibility to repent of sin and believe in Jesus.

It is the church's communal responsibility to then to assess their credible profession of faith and baptize them in the name of the Father and Son and the Holy Spirit. And it is the responsibility and the prerogative of God alone to impart the living spirit of God.

[54 : 24] God. This is why spirit baptism is the privilege of every single believer.

This doesn't mean that you can't be more filled with the Spirit. We can be. We are in fact commanded to be filled with the Spirit more and more. However, every Christian, true Christian, born in Christian, is baptized in the Holy Spirit because that's what 1 Corinthians 12, 13 says. For in one spirit we are all baptized into one body. Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and all were made to drink of one spirit. But if you refuse to repent, instead of being sanctified by the Holy Spirit, instead of being consecrated by the Holy Spirit, you will be consumed by the Holy Spirit.

And that's what verse 12 means. 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. The farmers in those days, when they harvest the wheat, they will gather them all in the threshing floor, and they will use a big winnowing fork to scoop up bunches of the wheat, and they will fling it up into the air, and while the heavy kernels of wheat fall to the ground, the light chaff and all the husks and the gunk that you don't need will be blown off by the wind because they're light.

And that's how they separate the chaff from the wheat, and then the wheat is gathered into the barn, and then the chaff is gathered and burned. And that's the imagery that Jesus uses here of divine judgment.

[56 : 06] I know it's not a comfortable subject, but it says so here in the Bible in verse 7. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? divine wrath is a reality.

Because God is just, because God is holy, he can't but have wrath towards sinners who have offended his glory and his rule and his holiness.

That's why there's such urgency to repent. I can't improve on his words. I want to quote at length part of Jonathan Edwards' sermon from the 18th century preached during the Great Awakening. A famous sermon he delivered in Enfield, Connecticut called Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. And this is what he says. Your wickedness makes you, as it were, heavy as lead.

And to tend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell. And if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf.

[57 : 17] And your healthy constitution and your own care and prudence and best contrivance and all your righteousness would have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell than a spider's web would have to stop a falling rock.

There are the black clouds of God's wrath now hanging directly over your heads, full of the dreadful storm and big with thunder. And were it not for the restraining hand of God, it would immediately burst forth upon you.

The sovereign pleasure of God for the present stays his rough wind. Otherwise it would come with fury and your destruction would come like a whirlwind and you would be like the chaff of the summer threshing floor.

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you and is dreadfully provoked.

His wrath towards you burns like fire. He looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the fire. He is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight.

[58 : 22] You are 10,000 times more abominable in his eyes than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince.

And yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to hell the last night, that you were suffered to awake again in this world after you close your eyes to sleep.

And there's no other reason to be given why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up.

It's a frightening description of God's wrath. And it is true because as Habakkuk 1.3 says, God is of purer eyes than to see evil. He cannot even see evil.

He cannot condone or tolerate evil. So why does God hold even unrepentant sinners up this very moment?

[59 : 33] 2 Peter 3.9 says, The Lord is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. every hour that you live, every minute of your life, every second of your life is a gracious opportunity from God to repent of your sins.

And if you have yet to repent and turn to Jesus, then let me tell you how to do that. Romans 5.8-9, we read from earlier in the assurance of pardon. God shows his love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Since therefore we have not been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. How are we saved from this fiery wrath of God?

It's the blood of Jesus. The death that Jesus died on the cross in our place, in the place of sinners. He was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, and God has laid upon him the chastisement, the punishment that we deserved.

This is what it means when the Bible speaks of Jesus as the propitiation that God put forth.

Propitiation to propitiate is to satisfy God's wrath.

[60 : 59] 1 John 4.10 says, In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins. Why did God send Jesus to be the propitiation for our sins?

Because God loved us, because God loved sinners, so that he might provide a way for Jesus to satisfy his just and holy wrath. David Wells, Christian theologian, summarizes it this way.

Man is alienated from God by sin, and God is alienated from man by wrath. It is in the substitutionary death of Christ that sin is overcome and wrath averted, so that God can look on man without displeasure, and man can look on God without fear.

Sin is expiated, and God is propitiated. This is an amazing reality. Think about that wrath, and fire wrath of God, and then look down a little bit, and I will end with this, and at the end of chapter three, at what God says of his son, Jesus, after he is baptized.

In verse 17, this is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased. that's the word that Jesus deserved to hear.

[62 : 22] That's the word that Jesus should have heard all his life. Instead, on the cross, Jesus faces the unrelenting, fiery wrath of God the Father because he is taking our place so that in his death and resurrection, God can look upon us with pleasure and say, this is my beloved son, because we're all in Jesus.

We're called sons sometimes in the Bible. This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.

That's what God now says over every single one of his people who have turned, who have repented, and trusted in Jesus.

Let's pray. Father, Father, I confess that I am weak.

I have preached your gospel, but I cannot make a single person repent. And I cannot make a single person receive the Holy Spirit.

But I trust in you, O Lord God, and your son, Jesus, the coming one, who is mightier, who baptizes in the Holy Spirit and fire.

[63 : 58] Lord, go through this room. Save every single soul. Baptize every single one in the Holy Spirit and fire. And for all those who are already, who are already saved, all those who already belong to you and have repented of their sins, assure them of the great confidence that they now have in Jesus, that they are your beloved child.

that Jesus' perfect righteousness covers us. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.