

## John the Baptist Prepares the Way

<sup>1</sup> In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea <sup>2</sup> and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” <sup>3</sup> 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.’” <sup>4</sup> John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup> People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. <sup>6</sup> Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

<sup>7</sup> But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? <sup>8</sup> Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. <sup>9</sup> And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. <sup>10</sup> The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

<sup>11</sup> “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Four hundred years had come and gone. Since the last prophet, Malachi, the Persians who sent the captive Jews home from their exile had been replaced by the Greeks, and then the Romans, who set up their own puppet king, Herod. But in all of those four hundred years, God was silent. No prophets; no prophecies. Until John.

John just appeared in the wilderness, the son of a priest, but like Ezekiel he did not take up the duties of a priest when the time came. Instead, the Lord called him to speak to the people as the forrunner of the promised Messiah. For many months John preached out in the fields and the tangle of trees by the Jordan river, the places people called “wilderness.”

He preached about repentance. Why? Isn’t it enough to know about God and to belong to God’s people? To know about God is not the same as believing in him, or trusting in him, or putting your whole self, body and soul and eternal salvation, all into his loving hands. The pagans know about God, but don’t have his forgiveness. Even the devil and his demons know about God, and shudder. Knowing that there is a God does not carry away my sins. My sins are too heavy. Membership in a church, even our church, does not get rid of the shame and the guilt of our sins. “What does everyone desire more deeply than to be free from death and hell? Who would not be free from sin and have a good and happy conscience? If there

were a surgeon or a doctor on the other side of the world who could help, every country would become empty and deserted. Everybody would hurry away to get to this physician and risk everything, property, health, retirement account, even their very lives, to make this journey to be rid of sin.”<sup>a</sup> But what does John say? The physician is coming! Repent, get ready!

Now, repentance has two parts. It begins with being sorry for our sins and even frightened of God’s punishment for sin. But then the second part is trusting in God’s promise to forgive. This is truly how we obey the command of Isaiah: **“Prepare the way of the Lord.”** We don’t do this with shovels and trucks, as if God needs a smooth highway to walk on. We do it with sorrow over the way we have broken the Ten Commandments. And how do we **“make straight paths for him”**? With faith. Faith is how we receive all of God’s blessings, it’s the channel, the driveway, the I.V. tube at the hospital, through which all of God’s grace and goodness and gifts are given to us.

John came baptizing. He tells us in John’s Gospel that he was commanded by God the Father to baptize with water, and gave him a sign so that he would recognize the Savior who would baptize with the Holy Spirit.<sup>b</sup> Most of the baptizing that he did that we’re told about was with adults, who came confessing their sins and to have those sins washed away. We still ask adults to be instructed before they’re baptized so that they know what is happening and won’t despise their baptism. With babies, who are part of God’s command **to baptize all nations**, we instruct them later when they can understand. **“All nations,”** the command Jesus himself gave about baptism, means that we offer baptism and freely give it to anyone who wishes. There is no fence around the sacrament of baptism.

About baptism, you know that we use ordinary water; any kind of water will do. The power comes from the word of God and not the water, just as the word of God is the essential thing and not the way we apply the water. So John may have scooped handfuls of water over people’s heads, or he might have tipped them back under the current, or he might have poured water over them with a pitcher, but what matters is that he baptized them for the forgiveness of their sins. Those who were baptized were given faith, or had their faith strengthened-- for baptism does all of these things. It creates faith, as Paul says: “All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Gal. 3:27), and that garment is faith. It also strengthens faith, because it has washed away all of your sins and has given you a good conscience.

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<sup>a</sup> Martin Luther, Church Postil Sermons I:38

<sup>b</sup> John 1:33

As John was doing this, some sceptics came, Pharisees who wanted to be first in everything and Saducees who didn't believe in miracles or heaven or much of anything to do with the Bible. John called on the dying embers of their faith when he said, **“Who *warned* you to flee from the coming wrath?”** God does not want anyone to perish or to be lost in hell, so he offers his forgiveness to everyone. These men with their tall hats and their flowing robes and gold and silver jewelry had learned about this as children. John recalls the lesson. God had told Satan in the Garden, **“I will put enmity (hatred) between you, Satan, and the woman, and between your unbelieving seed and her seed, who is Christ. He will crush your head”** (Gen. 3:15). All of the prophets testify about the coming wrath of God, but also the blessing of faith and forgiveness, if only they would trust in God.

John prophesies about the coming of Jesus, which by this time was very far away, weeks, perhaps, or just days. He says that the one who was coming would do powerful things, things that only God does.

Jesus will come, John says, **“with a winnowing fork in his hand.”** This extra wide pitchfork was used at harvest time to throw the trampled wheat into the air so that the useless hulls would blow away and the good heads of wheat would fall into his pile.

Jesus will come, John says, **“and he will clear his threshing floor.”** Not one single grain of wheat will be forgotten, just as when the Last Day comes, not one single believer will be left or missed, for “a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.” And he also says, “No one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.”<sup>a</sup>

Jesus will come, John says, **“gathering his wheat into the barn.”** What is our place after the Last Day? It is in God’s house with him forever. Just as the place for the good wheat is in the barn, so also the place for God’s holy people is gathered into heaven, seated at the banquet table of the Wedding Feast of the Lamb, to celebrate and rejoice and to praise God forever. The Lord will say to his servants about you, **“Quick! Bring the best robe and put in on them. Put on ring on that finger and sandals on those feet! Enter into my Father’s house! Well done, good and faithful servant! Come and share your master’s happiness!”**<sup>b</sup>

The alternative to faith, to forgiveness, and to being part of God’s family, is to be sent into **the unquenchable fire**. This is what our sins deserve. But our Jesus has used another fire,

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<sup>a</sup> Matthew 12:20; John 10:29

<sup>b</sup> Luke 15:18; Matthew 25:21

accompanied by the Holy Spirit, the purifying fire and the faith-giving Spirit we see first at Pentecost and again in each of our lives.

How will you and I respond to this promise today? Remember your baptism and rejoice over your baptism the way that you celebrate your birthday or your anniversary, or for some, the day that you began your sobriety-- a day that is more important to many even than their birthday. The day you came to faith in Jesus, either as an adult or as a baby. What a blessing to remember. A miracle in your life. To be forgiven! And you are! And the peace of God which transcends our understanding guards your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus. Amen.