

Prepare the way for the Lord

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[0 : 00] Every important event needs some kind of preparation. A wedding, for example, often takes months to prepare. Sometimes years. You know, you've got to get a venue, you've got to sort out your guest list and who's going to be on the guest list and who's not going to be on the guest list.

Women have got to sort out their wedding dress and get the right one and make it look all fancy and I don't know what is involved there. You know, that's always a closed door for the grooms. You've got to sort out the rings.

There's tons of stuff. The emcee, the reception, the honeymoon. The list just goes on of all the preparation you need to do for the combining of two people into one flesh.

But even smaller events require preparation, don't they? Even events as simple as going out for dinner. It requires some preparation, I hope, that you put on decent clothes, that maybe you put on some deodorant, maybe look in the mirror, do your hair, whatever preparation you do.

A business meeting needs preparation. Doesn't it? If you go to a business meeting, if you're part of a company, needs an agenda at least. The people who go need to have at least thought through the topics that are being discussed.

[1 : 10] You can't go totally unprepared to a meeting. And so we do in our lives spend a fair bit of time just preparing for things, don't we? Preparing for events, things that are going to happen in our lives.

Well, at Christmas we celebrate one of the most important events of human history. The birth of Jesus. The creator God himself becoming part of his creation.

Coming to us, his creatures. An amazing event that was anticipated centuries before by prophets. And the defining event that our calendars today are based on.

The defining event that really changed the face of the world. That changed history. That changed world politics. But just like all important events, it is also an event that needed preparation.

People needed to prepare for Jesus to come. And that is what this passage in Matthew is all about. How to prepare for Jesus.

[2 : 17] But not only how people then needed to prepare for Jesus to come, but how we today need to prepare for Jesus to come into our own lives and rule.

Especially as we head into Christmas this week. And so that's what I want us to see this morning. If you leave with nothing else, I want you to leave with the knowledge of how to prepare for Jesus as we go into Christmas.

Now, you might not be surprised that people were called to prepare for the coming of Jesus. What is surprising is that this call came from an eccentric hobo called John. Because let's be honest, John was a weirdo.

He ate locusts and he dressed in camel skins. He was that guy you see in public and you try not to make eye contact with. You know, he was that guy on the train who you just, nobody wants to sit near because he's standing up and sprouting stuff.

And everybody wants to avoid him like the plague. You know, have you seen those people on trains who stand up and shout and they don't care what people think of them? Well, John was kind of like that, I imagine. But the thing about John, which is striking, is that despite his appearance, people still listened to him.

[3 : 27] They still wanted to come and hear what he had to say because of what he was saying. And despite the fact that he was out in the middle of nowhere, literally he was in the desert in Judea and people didn't go there, you know, for a day trip.

There was nothing there. He was out in the middle of the wilderness, away from all the major settlements, away from all the activity. And yet people flocked to him. We see in verse 5, people went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan.

Now, why would people flock to hear a weird hobo? Think about it. What would cause them to come out and want to listen to him?

Well, it's because this weird hobo wasn't saying the things that a weird homo normally sprouts. But this man was speaking the words of God. You see, he was a prophet.

John was a prophet. And people recognized that. They recognized that his words were not his own. And so the reason they came out was not because of John himself. And it certainly wasn't because of the scenery.

[4 : 30] The reason they came out is to hear the words of God, their creator. And, you know, I wish there was more of that today, don't you?

I wish people would come to church to hear from God. Not to hear the preacher. Not because of the music. Not because of the decor. But because they are thirsty for the word of God.

Well, these people coming to John were thirsty. They were thirsty for God's word. And you know the reason we know that they were thirsty? Is because what they got to drink wasn't that sweet at all.

But they took it in anyway. John didn't tell people what they wanted to hear. But what they needed to hear. He preached about repentance. He told people that they were hypocrites.

He said that judgment and fire is coming. He wasn't winning any popularity contests. That's for sure. And yet people still came to listen. Because he was speaking the words of God.

[5 : 27] And it didn't matter how uncomfortable those words were. People recognized these are the words of my creator. And I need to hear them. Let me ask you.

Do you come to church because you're thirsty for God's word? Is that what brought you to church this morning? Because that's why you should be coming. Or was it for one of a thousand other reasons that people might come to church?

It's worth asking yourself that question. Why? Why did you come to church this morning? Are you thirsty for God? To hear from his word? Is that what brought you? Anyway, the reason John preached what he did, we're told, was to prepare people for the arrival of Jesus, who was about to enter into his public ministry.

And in doing so, Matthew tells us in verse 3, that John was in fact fulfilling a prophecy that was given by Isaiah 700 years before. And the prophecy, which Alan read for us earlier, was this.

A voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. That's what Isaiah said, that there would be this voice in the wilderness who would prepare people for the coming of God.

[6 : 40] And John, it turns out, was that voice that Isaiah was talking about. But as with all fulfillments of prophecy, and I hope you've been seeing over the last few weeks, as we've been looking at all these prophecies that are fulfilled in the Christmas story, we really need to read the whole thing to understand just what was going on.

So turn with me to Isaiah 40, 1 to 5. And if you can't find it in time, it will be on the screen behind me. Let's listen to this prophecy from Isaiah. Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed and that her sin has been paid for and that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low. The rough ground shall become level, the rugged places are plain, and the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all the people will see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

And so Isaiah starts by saying comfort. He says God's people are going to find great comfort in what I'm about to say next, which is that finally they are going to find peace.

[8 : 00] He talks about the end of hostility, peace. Now, at the time of writing, when people listened to Isaiah and read what he wrote, they would have assumed that he was talking about peace with their national enemies at the time, Assyria and Babylon and them.

But Isaiah is actually talking about a much greater peace that they needed, which is peace with God. Because they weren't at peace with God.

It didn't matter what kind of national conflicts they had. The real conflict that they had was the conflict in their hearts with God. Because you know what?

People are not, by nature, at peace with God. We mustn't think that everything is hunky-dory in the world, and God and people are kind of in this ceasefire.

No. People are not at peace with God. People are at war with God, whether they know it or not. Our sin separates us from God. Our sin causes us to rebel against His rule.

[9 : 00] And it brings His judgment on us. People are not at peace with God. And so our greatest need, all of us, your greatest need this morning, is peace with God. There is no greater need.

Before anything else, humans need peace with their Creator. Because if they're not at peace, everything is wrong. But that's what Isaiah prophesies is going to happen. People will be at peace, finally, with God.

And listen to how. This is very interesting. Verse 2. That her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. Okay, this reminds us that the only way people can ever be at peace with God is if their sin is dealt with, if their sin is paid for.

And Isaiah prophesies here that God is going to be the one who will settle their account with Him. He will pay for their sins against Him. And the phrase, she will receive double for her sins, doesn't mean that God will punish His people twice over.

In fact, it means the opposite. It means that He will pay for her twice over, double, by not only not giving her the punishment she deserves for her sins, but over and above that, giving her the blessings that she doesn't deserve.

[10 : 16] God will pay double for His people's sins, give them over and above what they deserve. Now, interesting, this often happens with prophets. Isaiah is talking in the past tense, but he's actually talking about a future event, which God was still going to do.

But how would God do this? How would God pay for His people's sin and pay double? Well, Isaiah goes on to tell us from verse 3 to 5. Have a look.

God Himself would come and sort this sin thing out once and for all. God Himself was going to arrive. And so Isaiah says, because of that, get ready.

Make preparations for God to come. You know, I've got this picture of, and it's not a very good illustration, but it's kind of like in a big office block, and you've got the directors and the bosses right at the top, and the normal plebs who work in the sort of offices down below never see these big bosses, and they've got a problem that they just can't solve.

And then someone says, the boss is coming. You know, the boss is coming from up top. And then everybody kind of clears their desks and gets ready. It's kind of the picture. Not exactly, but it's kind of the picture. There's a problem that no one can solve.

[11 : 23] Isaiah says, the boss is coming. Okay, and He's going to solve the problem that you can't solve. That's kind of the picture of what's going on. God Himself is going to come. So, get ready.

But more, the illustration that's actually used here is like when a king visited a town back in the day, the townsfolk would go out and make sure that nothing will get in his path. Nothing will prevent him from coming in to the town.

So, they would look at the roads, any rocks that were in, they would clear the way. They would make sure any fallen trees are cleared away so that the king and his entourage can get into town without delay. Now, that's the image that Isaiah is using here about clearing the way, about making a path, a highway.

And that's what he says will need to happen. People will need to get ready because their king is coming. God is coming to earth. Now, we know, don't we?

All these centuries later, we know what Isaiah was talking about. Don't we? And if you don't yet, Matthew makes it quite clear this prophecy of the boss coming was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, the birth of Jesus.

[12 : 38] Jesus is God coming to his people. That's what we celebrate at Christmas. That's what it's all about. The creator of this universe decided to come to us, his creation.

That is what the real celebration of Christmas is. Jesus is God coming to his people. But over and above that, Jesus is God coming to pay double for their sins. And he did that by going to the cross and by dying in our place for our sins.

And there, not only did he pay the punishment for our sins to save us from hell, but he gave us his righteousness to make us fit for heaven. To bring us into God's very own family, something that we

never earned.

He paid double, more than double, we deserve. He undid all our sins and then he gave us his righteousness. There is no greater news in all the world.

And Isaiah prophesied hundreds of years before that God was going to do this incredible thing. He didn't quite know how God was going to do it. He just got the words that God told him to say. He probably didn't really, he didn't foresee the cross and that being the way that God was going to do it. [13:52] But he knew that God was going to come and do it. He knew that God was going to come down and settle the sin thing once and for all. But I want you to notice in his prophecy that he doesn't leave it there.

He doesn't just say, okay, God will come. He says, get ready. Prepare for that. If this is going to apply to you, you need to prepare for it, he was telling the people.

You see, it wasn't enough. And it's important to see this. It wasn't enough just to know that the Lord was coming. People needed to do something with that knowledge. And it was the same with John the Baptist.

When we look at Matthew 3 and John the Baptist's preaching, you see exactly the same thing. He's saying people needed to prepare for the Lord to come in order to have their sins paid for.

And it's the same with each of us. It's not enough just to believe that Jesus is who he is. The demons believed who Jesus was.

[14:55] And we saw a few weeks ago, Herod believed who Jesus was. That didn't stop him from trying to kill him. See, it's not enough just to believe. And don't fool yourself into thinking it is.

We need to prepare for him to come into our lives so that what he did on the cross applies to us. So how do we do that?

How do we prepare? Well, both John and Isaiah tell us. And there's really three parts to it that I want you to see this morning. The first way to prepare is to clear the way.

Clear the way. Isaiah says from verse 3, Prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up. Every mountain hill made low.

And the rough ground shall become level. The rugged places are plain. So I said earlier that when a king was visiting a town, the townsfolk would remove any obstacle in the way that might slow him down or stop him from arriving.

[15:58] And Isaiah is saying, well, we also need to do that with God. We need to remove any obstacles that would prevent him from coming and being king in our lives.

And you know what I think the biggest obstacles to God's rule in our lives are? It's what I call cherished sins. Cherished sins.

Things that we know are not what God wants in our lives, but we like them too much to get rid of them. You know what I'm talking about? Things that we hide. Things that we even hide from ourselves.

We don't consciously think about them because they'll make us feel guilty, but we just don't want to get rid of them. We pretend like they're not there, but every now and again, maybe when no one's looking, we indulge.

No one has to know whether that's watching things that we shouldn't watch and we know we shouldn't, looking on the internet, things that we shouldn't be looking for or whether that's drinking too much, getting drunk, but maybe at home, at night, when no one's there, no one knows.

[17:09] Or maybe that's nurturing unloving thoughts and attitudes towards others in our minds that no one has to know about, but it just makes us feel better. See, lots of these things are never seen by other people and so you can hide them, but make no mistake, they are fatal to you.

Those things are fatal because they are obstructing the rule of God in your life. They are preventing the king from coming in. And so as John the Baptist said, what you need to do is repent of those.

Not just repent of the easy sins, but repent of the ones that you really enjoy and that you hide. Identify them, root them out, confess them, and take them down.

And yes, some of these obstacles are big, and hard to move. And they take much effort and struggle, but you can't leave them undealt with.

They need to be cleared away for the king to come in. But it's not only sins that may prevent God's rule in your life.

[18:15] Listen, interestingly, to what Hebrews says to us in chapter 12. It says, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.

But not just the sin, notice, everything else as well that hinders. Even things that aren't sins may hinder us in following Christ, may hinder God's work and authority in our lives.

Even good things may do that. They may just be habits we form that don't allow for time in the Word. Habits that might crowd out our prayers and our fellowship.

Things that we enjoy that get in the way. You know, people are so busy today. I mean, that's one of the things about today's world. Everybody's just so busy. Most people, when I say, how are you? They say, I'm really busy. You know, we are. We've got so many demands on us. Time is so tight. And people are busy. People are too busy. Often people are too busy for Bible study.

[19 : 19] Too busy for quiet time. And then they wonder why they find themselves drifting from God. Because you see, your busyness, good as it may be, and you might be busy doing good things, but your busyness is hindering your walk with God.

And sometimes, you just need to throw off certain things to make time for what's far more important. You know, we do the things that we know are important. We make time to eat supper, mostly, because our bodies need it.

You know, we make time for the things that are important. We make time to, I don't know, brush our hair, to put on clothes. We make time for the important things. We must make time for the most important thing, which is your walk with God.

So, clear the way. Secondly, secondly, is to be cleansed, be washed. Now, I'm not making a dig at your personal hygiene here.

I'm sure you're very clean most of the time. What I'm talking about is spiritual cleansing, which is symbolized here in John baptizing people. Now, you must understand that baptism doesn't make these people spiritually clean.

[20 : 38] All baptism is, is a symbol of God's promise to cleanse people inwardly from their sins. And so, what John was doing physically in washing these people, God would do spiritually through Jesus.

Jesus. But I want you to notice something very important. These people had to come and be baptized by John. They didn't baptize themselves.

And that's important because often in those days, Jewish baptisms would be self-administered. People would baptize themselves. They would go and stand in a river or a stream and they would take things and they'd baptize them.

It's like having a shower, but it would be a religious kind of symbolic act. So, the fact here that John was baptizing people was actually deeply significant in that what he was doing because they knew when they came that this was a picture of a spiritual reality.

And in making sure that they were baptized and didn't baptize themselves, he was calling these people to admit that they could not cleanse themselves from their sins. That they had no way of washing their own hearts.

[21 : 50] which is very, very unlike what all other religions say, isn't it? I mean, other religions, basically, all of them, say that you can cleanse yourself from your sin by doing certain religious activities, which of course vary from religion to religion.

But God wants to tell us that no amount of religious activities, no amount of good works will cleanse you from your sin. someone else has to do that.

Someone else needs to cleanse you. You can't do it. And not just anyone. Someone who has no sin of his own, which wasn't John, by the way.

John goes on to say, in fact, that he can only baptize with water. Someone else is coming who alone can truly cleanse people from sin, and that is Jesus. the only person who died for human sin. He is the only person ever who will be able to cleanse you from your sin. So, do you want to be cleansed from your sin? Do you want to be washed?

[22 : 58] You know, you look in the mirror, you might be clean on the outside, but you know you're not clean on the inside, and there's nothing you can do, no amount of soap or sponges can get inside, can get into your heart.

Do you want to be cleansed? Do you need someone to do that for you? You need Jesus to do that. Do you want to experience what it's really like to be clean? To know that God accepts you and loves you and none of your sins count against you?

Because that is the most liberating knowledge anybody can ever have. Do you want that? Do you? Well, let me tell you, no religion can give it to you.

So stop looking in religion. Religion will always leave you wondering, well, have I done enough? Am I really clean? Because there's always something more to do in religion. Now, do you want true, undoubted cleansing that you can know today you are clean?

Well, then come to Jesus. Admit your inability. Give your sins to Him. Stop thinking that you can cleanse yourself and trust in Jesus to do it through His death on the cross.

[24 : 08] And when you do that, you'll be cleansed. Be cleansed. Finally, the final way to prepare for the coming of Jesus in our lives is to bear fruit.

Bear fruit. Amongst the crowds coming to John were some Pharisees and Sadducees. These were the Jewish religious leaders of the day. and John spots them in the back of the crowd and he suddenly fixates on them and he's got this to say to them.

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance 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.

It's not the nicest way to say hello, but it was something that these religious leaders really needed to hear because being Jewish they assumed that they were already in God's good books because they were Jews.

Now they didn't think that they were sinless otherwise they wouldn't have come to John for baptism at all. But the thing about them is they also didn't think they needed to change much. They thought, you know, they just put on the funny hats and they go to the temple from time to time and they make the odd sacrifice and, you know, God will be okay with that.

[25 : 24] But John says, no, no, you need to bear fruit. They weren't bearing any fruit of repentance, he says. And that might be you this morning as well.

Maybe you're assuming that you're a Christian because you come to church or you take communion. Maybe you even admit that you're a sinner and you need Jesus, but the fact is there's still no fruit in your life.

You're still living in a way that you know is not pleasing to God. And you're assuming that because you believe that's enough, you don't need to change anything else. Well, let me tell you, in the most loving way possible, that's not enough.

That's not enough. John says, bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Fruit is doing the will of God.

It's things like loving your neighbor, obeying the great commission.

Now, of course, you won't do them perfectly. Even the best fruit often still has worms in it. But it's still fruit. And it proves that the tree is not dead. Even though the fruit's imperfect, just the fact that fruit's coming off the tree proves that the tree is alive.

[26 : 36] And fruit in your life is evidence that you are spiritually alive. It's evidence that you are truly saved. And fruit in your life is necessary because, as John goes on to say to these Pharisees, the axe 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.

I'm glad that John came because I don't think anybody has the guts to say those kind of things today. If you're not producing fruit, you know, producing fruit won't save you.

Only Jesus can do that. But not producing fruit will condemn you. As Martin Luther famously said, we are saved by grace alone, but the grace that saves is never alone.

And if you know that you're not producing fruit this morning, if you know you're not living the way God wants you to, then be thankful that you've come to realize that this morning and come to God and pray for His Spirit to take control.

Give up control. Pray for His Spirit to come and then open the Bible and listen to God and do what He says. Just do what He says. Don't question it.

[27 : 57] Don't go, well, I'm not sure. Maybe I'll try. Maybe I'll do a little bit of that and not much of that. Maybe I'll pick and choose. Just do what God says. And then you will bear fruit.

Or rather, Jesus will bear fruit through you. Because listen to what Jesus says. He says, I am the vine. You are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit.

Apart from me, you can do nothing. And so in closing, have you prepared your life for the coming of the King?

Have you identified and cleared away the things that may be preventing Him from ruling in your life? Have you put your faith in Him and found cleansing from your sins?

And are you bearing fruit in keeping with repentance? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank You for the weird eccentric John.

[29 : 04] We thank You for sending him to sober us up to give us a bit of a slap in the face, to tell us how it really is.

Help us not to be complacent like those Pharisees. Help us, Lord, not to presume Your grace, but help us to be so overwhelmed by what You did to rescue us in Jesus that we will desire to bear fruit, that we will be thirsty for Your Word and that when we hear it, we will guard and do what it says. Help us, by Your Holy Spirit, to bear fruit in keeping with repentance and preserve us by Your power safely to eternal life. In Jesus' name. Amen.