

Getting Ready for God to Arrive

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- [0 : 0 0] I want you to imagine that China is planning to invade and take over South Africa. But, now just imagine that. Imagine the Chinese government.
- Now China has a serious military force. South Africa would not be able to stand against them. And they have decided that they want to take over this country, South Africa.
- But, in typical Chinese style, they're very polite about it. So they warn us before they do it. A few months ahead, they warn us, just by the way, we have decided that we want to take over your country and your government and your resources.
- Now, think about just that hypothetical scenario. Don't worry, they're not actually, as far as I know, planning to invade South Africa. But, hypothetically, think about that scenario. How would that affect you?
- If there was going to be this massive change of leadership, of government, in South Africa. What would that mean for you? Well, I think for many in South Africa, it might be a relief.
- [1 : 0 4] Maybe, finally, load shedding will stop. Who knows? But, no matter what happens, if something so big and sort of groundbreaking were to happen, an invasion from another country, it would undoubtedly change a lot in our lives.
- Right? As, throughout history, any country that's been invaded by a force coming in from the outside will inevitably change the life of the citizens, one way or another.
- How would it change your life if that happened? How would you prepare for that? Think about it. China was going to invade and take over. How would you prepare? Well, I mean, I would start to learn Chinese.
- Okay? That's one way you would do something different. You would take that seriously. Okay, let's learn about China. Let's do some research. Let's see what it's like to live under Chinese rule, which is very different to living in the country that we've been living in so long.
- And so it would change and we would have to prepare for that. We wouldn't just sit back and do the same thing as usual. We would take steps to prepare for a change of government, each one of us, in some way or another.
- [2 : 1 1] Now I want to ask you another question. How have you prepared for the coming of God's rule into this world? What have you done to prepare for that?
- Because that is far more certain than China invading. God's rule and government coming to take over in this world.
- What necessary changes have you made in your life to prepare for that government? Well, that's really the whole point of John the Baptist's ministry that we come to today in Matthew chapter 3.
- John the Baptist was sent, and it was prophesied in the Old Testament that he would arrive to herald, to prepare people for the coming of God's government to earth.
- And to help people here to realize in Matthew 3 that the coming of Jesus, the Son of God, was actually the beginning of God's invasion to take back a rebellious world.

[3 : 14] And John, in his ministry, was to call people to get ready for that. And his message as we read it, which we're going to do, is no less relevant today than it was then.

And it's something we all need to hear, because it turns out that even we as Christians are not as ready as we think. So let's have a look in Matthew chapter 3 and learn what he says.

And the first point he's making is essentially get ready. Get ready for the kingdom. So just before Jesus starts his ministry and arrives on the scene, we have John the Baptist.

And we pick it up from verse 1. In those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Or the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Now, what does he mean? What is the kingdom of heaven? We hear that phrase.

[4 : 22] We see that phrase in the Bible. But what does it actually mean, the kingdom of heaven? And it's something we need to clarify in our minds and understand properly. Because many think of heaven as going somewhere when we die.

But that's not what John means when he says the kingdom of heaven. He doesn't mean people escaping earth to go to heaven. But he means the rule of heaven coming down to earth.

That's what the kingdom of heaven actually is when we read about it in the Bible. The kingdom of heaven means the rule of heaven. The authority and the government of heaven on earth.

So it's God's government. In other words, it's the world run the way God wants it to be run. Which it currently isn't. You'll notice. But that's what the kingdom of heaven is.

And the kingdom of God, you'll also see that phrase a lot in Matthew. That's essentially talking about the same thing. The rule of heaven coming down to earth. The world being run exactly the way God has always wanted it to be run.

[5 : 33] That is what he means. That is what it means when we read the kingdom of heaven. And it's what we pray for as Christians. It's what Jesus teaches us to pray for. You know, in the Lord's Prayer, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

We're praying that God's will, God's government in heaven will actually come down to earth. And that earth will start to be run the way God wants it to. That's what we pray. That's what we want as Christians.

That's what we should want. But it's actually what everybody wants, even if they don't realize it. Non-Christians as well. They wouldn't call it the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven.

But it's what they want. A world with no disease. A world with no corruption. A world with no crime. A world with no war. Where everything works the way the creator of the world wants it to.

Everybody wants that. And what that is, is actually the kingdom of heaven. Everybody, whether they know it or not, wants the kingdom of heaven on earth. They want God's rule, even if they don't know that that's what they want.

[6 : 39] And that's what God wants. That's what God wants. And that's what God has been planning. That's what the whole Old Testament was looking forward to.

Was pointing towards. The government of God coming down to earth. The kingdom of God. The rule of God. On earth. The world the way God wants it.

It's what the Jews were waiting for. Here when John the Baptist comes. But the point that John is making to the people of his day. Is you're not ready for it.

That's essentially the point he's making. Yes, you've been wanting. The prophets have been talking about God's rule coming down to earth. But you are not yet ready for it. That's the essence of John the Baptist's message.

And the reason is because he says you first need to do something before you'll be ready for it. And that is repent. The word repent. Repent. Now we again.

[7 : 44] That's another word we hear a lot of in the Bible. But what does it mean? To repent. Well. The original word literally means to turn around. And at its very basic.

Repent means to change. To change. Whether it's to change your mind. Which it sometimes means in scripture. To change the way you think about something.

Or whether it's to change your behavior. Which most of the time it means in scripture. The essence of the word means to change. And by John saying that. He's saying that is the most basic requirement.

To be ready for the rule of God on earth. Something needs to change in your life. Before you are ready for that. That's what he means by repent. You need to acknowledge that the ways that your life is not yet consistent with what is coming.

And to change appropriately. Just as we would have done if China was invading. Or some other government was coming. We would acknowledge how am I living that's not consistent with what they're going to need and want.

[8 : 45] And how must I change appropriately. Well that's what repent means when it comes to God's rule. How are the parts of my life that are. Or what parts of my life are not yet consistent with that rule that's coming.

And how must I change. That's what repentance means. And by the way when the Bible talks about repentance. It's not a one sort of thing that you do at the beginning of your Christian life.

And then it's done. It's an ongoing process. Of continually coming to church. And hearing God's word. And listening to God's will and his government.

And every time we hear that. Asking ourselves how is my life still needing to change. You see a Christian life is a continual life of change.

If you've stopped changing you've stopped repenting. And John is encouraging these people to repent in light of the coming of God's rule to earth.

[9 : 44] And it is now urgent. It's urgent. Because Jesus has come. That's what John means by the kingdom has come near.

The rule of God is much closer than it ever was before. Because his son has come to herald it. The coming of Jesus to earth is the first stage in God's rule.

God's invasion of his own world. To retake it from rebels. The coming of Jesus was the first stage in that process.

And John the Baptist knew that. And he was warning people of that. But of course Jesus' coming doesn't bring the fullness of God's government to earth yet.

But Jesus came the first time to save people from their sins by dying on the cross. So that they can start living under the rule of heaven before it arrives on earth.

[10 : 44] That's why he came the first time. And that was the unexpected delay. So when the Jews still actually today. The Jews who are waiting for the Messiah having missed that he's already come.

The reason they don't see Jesus as the Messiah is because they expected him to bring God's government on earth once and for all when he came. But there was this delay that the Bible reveals to us. Because we need to come individually in our lives under the rule of heaven before the rule of heaven comes to earth.

And that's what the first coming of Jesus was about. That's what the church is about. That's what this is about. Us coming to church. Every time we come to church it's us learning how to prepare for the rule of heaven on earth.

It's learning how to live under the rule of God in our own lives first. Before it's too late. Before Jesus' second coming. So we can start living under God's rule before it arrives on earth.

Kind of like the French resistance did before the liberation of Paris in World War II. I don't know if you're into history. But basically World War II I'm sure you've heard about that.

[11 : 52] The Nazi Germans took over a large section of Europe including France and Paris. And they ruled it for years. German government was over Paris.

Until 1944 after D-Day. August 1944 the Allied forces came in and liberated Paris. But before they did the French resistance was active. And this was a group of people who weren't living under German rule.

And who were preparing to live under the liberated rule to come. And they were encouraging other people to do that. Even though that was difficult under German rule. They had already changed allegiance to the new government before it arrived.

Well that's what Christians are. People who have already changed allegiance away from this world.

And to the government that is yet to arrive but hasn't yet. But they're already living under that rule before it comes. That's what a Christian is. So have you done that yet?

[13 : 02] Have you changed allegiance to the coming rule yet? Well that's one of the things you do at a Christian baptism. We just had a couple of baptisms.

A wonderful sign from God. A wonderful moment in a Christian's life. And at a baptism you would have noticed if you were listening to what was said.

That it's not just about receiving the promises of God's forgiveness. Which it is about and it's wonderful. But it's not just about that. It's also about declaring your changed allegiance.

So in the baptism service. We've got this line. That the person being baptized says, I renounce. I renounce. I turn aside from the empty display, greed and false values of the world.

They are announcing that they are now part of the resistance. That they've turned their back on the way the world is. And they are changing allegiance to the way the world will be.

[14 : 05] When Jesus comes back. That's what a Christian does. That they choose to not follow and chase after the things that the people around us follow and chase after.

That they choose to make a clear break from the ways of the world. Not to try to have a foot in both camps. But to clearly break from where the world is going and to swear your allegiance to the coming rule.

Have you done that yet? Have you done that? I should also be asking to those who were baptized as infants like I was.

Whether that is true of your life. Because your parents would have made those promises on your behalf. And they would have raised you to be part of the resistance. Are you still?

Are you living differently to the world? Have you made that clean break in your life from the way the world is going? Well if you haven't yet. Then you need to.

[15 : 11] Because just as sure as Jesus came the first time. He is coming a second time. And we know he came the first time. And just as sure as his death and resurrection.

Which is historical fact. Which is what he said would happen. Just as sure as that did happen. So the other thing he said would happen will happen. Which is him coming back. To establish God's rule and government on this earth once and for all.

To bring God's rule in its fullness. But he came the first time to get you ready for that. By bringing God's rule into your life first. Has that happened yet?

Are you ready? Are you ready for that? And it's an important question to ask. Am I ready for that? Because as we go on in the passage.

We realize that even if you are baptized. Even if you are religious and you come to church. And you've been coming for many years.

[16:12] And you believe all this stuff. Even then. It still doesn't mean you're ready. And that's the next thing we discover. John's message. He goes on and teaches us.

Essentially don't think you're ready just because you're religious. Don't think you're ready. Just because you're religious. And he makes this point very clearly from verse 7. Have a look.

When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Let's just pause there. Who are they? They're the super religious people of the day. They're the people who obeyed all the laws.

And read the Bible more than everyone else. And were super religious. Okay. When they came. Verse 7. When he saw them coming to his baptism. He said to them. Brood of vipers.

That's not a very seeker sensitive service that John is running. Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore produce fruit consistent with repentance.

[17:10] And don't presume to say to yourselves. We have Abraham as our father. For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. John was not the most politically correct guy.

You will have noticed. He would have been banned from social media a long time ago. He wasn't thinking about how to get bums on seats. How to grow a crowd.

His thing was to tell people the truth they needed to hear. And so you had these religious people coming along to his baptism. And you would expect religious people at a cleansing ritual.

Like baptism. Which is a very central religious thing. What John was doing. And he was. We saw from his attire. He was an Old Testament type prophet. And so they were interested to come and be involved in this.

You would expect these religious people at a cleansing ritual like baptism. That's what religious people do. Right? And religion itself.

[18:15] No matter what religion it is. Is all about being cleansed from sin. Getting on the right side of God. And that's what these guys are here to do. Let's cover all our bases.

If this baptism from John is going to help us get on the right side of God. Make sure that we're cleansed. Well let's do it. And so that's when John sees their motives. And he issues this special warning for these religious people.

And he basically says to them. You know you need to escape God's wrath. Who told you? You obviously found out somehow. Reading the Bible. That you need to escape God's wrath.

Well good for you. But so what? That's what John is saying to them. Even if you know you need to escape God's wrath. And you come here for baptism. So what? So what?

If you're still not going to go out and do what God wants. That's what he's saying. What's the point of going through all this religious stuff? Getting baptized. Coming here. Doing all that you do.

[19 : 13] If you're still not doing what God wants. That's why he calls them this brood of vipers. Because their lives are not consistent with their teaching. In other words I think John is saying to them.

Don't think you can come here to get cleansed. And then go home and feel good about yourself. If there is no change in your life. As he puts it in verse 8.

Therefore produce fruit. Consistent with repentance. Now that's a warning we all need to hear. Isn't it? As Christians.

Because it's very common in Christianity. To do exactly the same thing. That those religious people then were doing. To come to church. To hear the promises of God's grace. To confess our sins.

To get the assurance. To feel good. And to go home. And nothing's changed. To tick the box. To get our weekly insurance that we're fine.

[20 : 15] And then to go home. And actually nothing's changed out there in our lives. We also need to hear this warning. And we need to take it on board.

And we need to let it sit there for a while. And make us uncomfortable. That no matter what you believe. No matter whether you've been baptized or not. If you're not actually producing what God wants.

You're still not ready for his kingdom to come. That's what John is saying here. And he uses some very stark illustrations to make the point. Have a look at verse 10. The axe is already at the root of the trees.

Therefore every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. What's he talking about? Well it's a farming illustration.

A fruit farmer. Okay. A fruit farmer plants trees to produce fruit. If a tree doesn't produce fruit over a few seasons.

[21 : 16] What does he do? He cuts it down. So that there's space for another tree that will produce fruit. fruit. I have a mushroom box in our kitchen at home.

I got it for a present. And the idea, it's filled with stuff that makes mushrooms. And you cut a slit in it and then mushrooms grow out.

And you can harvest them and put them in your soup or whatever. And I did it and I cut it open. And these mushrooms popped up after a couple of weeks.

And harvested them and we fried them up in any. It doesn't matter what we did with them. Point is that they produced mushrooms. And then after I harvested them, they say the mushrooms carry on producing.

But I waited and I waited and I waited and I waited and nothing came. And then I noticed there was this green mold growing over the top of it. And we've had this thing sitting there for about two months now. Nothing's come of it.

[22 : 15] And it's just now this box of mulch sitting in our kitchen. And we have to get rid of it. It's not doing what it was meant to do. What's the point of keeping a box of mulch on the windowsill?

Well, you see, it's the same kind of thing John's saying here. The point of a fruit tree is to produce fruit. If it's not producing fruit, God will cut it out of his vineyard.

That's the point. God will get rid of, God will cut out of his kingdom those who are not producing the fruit of that kingdom. It's a very stern warning. And it's something that you see over and over again in Matthew.

This warning, this warning that if you're not producing the fruit consistent with the kingdom, God will cut you out. Jesus makes this point a number of times in Matthew.

But climaxes in Matthew 21, verse 43, when he says this to the Jews. He says, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruit.

[23 : 20] It will be taken away from you. These are the people of God. The people who received God's promises. And yet, God reserves the right to take his kingdom away if they're not producing the fruit that they're meant to.

God has no hesitation to remove people from his kingdom who are not producing the fruit he requires. He did it with the nation of Israel and he will do it with you if you are not producing the fruit he saved you to produce.

God's standards are no less today for Christians than they were then when John the Baptist said these words. Verse 9.

Verse 9. And don't presume to say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father. Or the Christian version, I'm elect.

I believe and I'm saved by faith alone, right? So I'm safe. Perseverance of the saints. I'm good. Well, that didn't work for them. It's not going to work for us.

[24 : 28] That's presumption. It's presuming. It's presuming. And it's a dangerous misunderstanding of the doctrine of salvation by faith alone. And if you spread it, you are a snake. John would say.

Because it ignores the clear teaching of scripture. That the only sure evidence of your election is that you're bearing fruit. You see, this is a sobering warning to us all.

We've got to examine our lives. We've got to ask, am I bearing fruit for the kingdom? It's uncomfortable to ask. It's uncomfortable for me to preach this.

But, there is good news as well. And the good news is that you're not expected to produce that fruit by some effort of your own will.

Look at verse 11. As John goes on. I baptize you with water for repentance. But the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I. I'm not worthy to remove his sandals.

[25 : 31] He himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. What he's saying, he's talking about Jesus, of course. And he's saying, the one who's coming after me can do something that I can't do for you.

See, I can warn you. I can wash you with water. I can do this ritual. But I can't change you inside. The one who's coming, he can.

He can do something I can't. He can give you the power to actually change and bear fruit if you let him in to do that.

And that, of course, is why we celebrate Pentecost today. Because that was the start. The Holy Spirit coming. The real power to change and bear fruit and be the people of the kingdom. That was what Pentecost was about.

And that was needed. We needed that to happen. We need the Holy Spirit. Because just as by grace we are saved, it is also by grace that we can produce any fruit at all.

[26 : 35] As we pray, Lord, I cannot in my own power do what you want me to do and live the life you want me to do. There is no health in me, as we prayed earlier.

But Lord, fill me. Come, take my life and fill me with your Spirit that I might produce fruit for you. You see, any fruit Christians produce is not the result of them, but it's the work of the Holy Spirit in them.

Which is why it's fruit in a Christian's life that is evidence that the Holy Spirit is actually there. You cannot say that you have the Holy Spirit and you are saved if there is, because if you do, there will be fruit.

You can't say that if there's no fruit. Because if you have the Holy Spirit, the evidence will be fruit in your life. And I don't just mean being at church and, you know, being on the roster, calling yourself a Christian, but ever increasing fruit in your life.

As Galatians 5 describes, if you want to know what this fruit looks like, well, Galatians 5 is a great place to go. You can just listen from verse 22.

[27 : 52] The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

And by the way, it's important to notice it's a singular, the fruit, not the fruits. Which means this is the bouquet of the kinds of lifestyle changes that will happen when the Holy Spirit is in you.

It is evidence of the Holy Spirit in a believer loving the unlovable people that you wouldn't normally love. With the kind of love that God has, a gracious love that doesn't demand payback.

Patience with those people that you would normally not be able to be patient with. Self-control with your body that you normally wouldn't have control over.

You know, that is the way of life of the coming kingdom. Those kind of things. That kind of way of life is the characteristic of the coming kingdom.

[29 : 02] And so those kind of things need to be increasingly evident in your life if you're going to be ready for that kingdom. There needs to be fruit. There needs to be fruit in our lives.

And if you're not convinced, listen to John's final warning. Verse 12. Talking about Jesus. His winnowing shovel or 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 fire that never goes out. What's he talking about?

Well, again, an agricultural metaphor that we wouldn't be familiar with. But the people listening then would have known what he was talking about. So let me explain to you what a winnowing fork is.

If you don't know, when they had grain or wheat, you would have the wheat kernel. But you would have the husks around it and you can't, the husks are useless.

[30 : 04] And so the way you would separate them is you would use this big fork, this winnowing fork. And you would put it into the pile and toss it up in the air. And then the wind would blow away the light husks, which we're called the chaff.

And then the wheat that the farmer wanted would fall back down. And then it would be separated. And then the farmer would destroy the chaff and keep the wheat. Well, that's the illustration that he's using here, that God is going to separate the world into those who are fit for his kingdom and those who are not.

Those who are bearing fruit and those who are not. I.e. those who are truly saved and have the Holy Spirit in them and those who don't. Those who are fit for the kingdom and those who are not.

But you know what John reveals here? If you read that verse carefully, he reveals that that process has already begun. That separation process. Because he talks about the winnowing fork being in the hand of Jesus as he comes.

With the coming of Jesus, the separation has already begun. God has already started to separate those two groups in this world. And he's still doing that today. Through the preaching of his word primarily.

[31 : 18] It's as this is the winnowing fork. This is what separates people. People who are drawn to this and obey it and people who are repelled by it and say, No, that's too uncomfortable for me.

I'm not coming back. You know, this is, as I said, it's uncomfortable to preach sobering passages like this. And not everyone likes hearing truths like this.

You know, over my years as a pastor, I can tell you of many people who have come into this church. They've started to come and then there's an uncomfortable passage and I don't see them again. There are some who don't come back when they hear this.

Because they don't want to change. Well, you know what that is? That's the winnowing fork. That's the separation happening today. Preaching this is not going to draw a crowd.

It's not meant to draw a crowd. It's meant to separate. But if you keep coming back, it'll also be what the Holy Spirit uses to change you, to bring fruit out of your life, and to prepare you for God's kingdom that is coming.

[32 : 30] So I hope to see you next week. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, the winnowing fork, that you use powerfully to work in us what is pleasing to you.

And those of us who hear it and submit to it, Lord, we thank you that you use it to bear fruit in our lives that we could not bear by ourselves.

We thank you, Lord, that not only do you save us by grace, but by grace you do your work in our lives. And we pray that you would help us not to resist that, but help us to let you.

And help us to be people who repent, not just once, but continually that we are changing, that we are willing to change, and that we let you change us, Lord, by the powerful work of your Spirit.

And we pray that through that process, you would cause us here at St. Mark's to bear much fruit for you, in Jesus' name. Amen.