

Preparing for God

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Preacher: Nick Louw

[0 : 0 0] Well, I want to ask you this morning, how do you prepare your home when someone important is coming to visit? Think about that. How do you prepare your home when someone important is coming to visit?

I remember in 2005 when I lived in London in a rather messy bachelor pad. Jean, my girlfriend who lived at the time in the United States, she was coming to fly over to London to visit me.

Now, as you can imagine, before her visit, I decided to do a very rare thing and clean up our house a bit. My housemates came home from work and they didn't know that they were in the same house.

They were astonished that we had moved forward the annual cleanup a little sooner than expected. Now, I know, of course, when you get married, things change a little bit.

There's not as much need to impress your spouse with tidying up the home. Things start to slip. But what about those of you who aren't yet married? Maybe there's someone special in your life.

[1 : 0 3] How do you prepare your home or your room when they come to visit you? I'm sure you put some kind of effort into it, don't you? Maybe you pick up your dirty socks, take the dishes to the kitchen.

Those mugs that have something growing in them, you move them away. Maybe you put them in the dishwasher for the first time that month. You know what I mean?

You always, when someone important is coming to visit, you'll prepare. You'll do something to ready the place for them. How do you prepare when someone important is coming to your home? Well, that's really what this morning's passage is all about, in a way.

It's about preparing for the arrival of someone important. But not just a boyfriend or a girlfriend. No, someone far more important than that. This passage that we're reading this morning is about preparing for the arrival of your God.

Now, how exactly do you prepare for that if God is coming to visit? Well, it's for that reason that this guy that we may or may know, called John the Baptist, was sent.

[2 : 1 3] His job was to help people prepare for God to arrive. And it's as we see just how he did that in this passage, that we also see what it means, not only for them then, but for us today, to prepare for God in our own lives as well.

And that's what I want us to see this morning. So let's have a look at what this passage says. Now, John the Baptist, you've got to understand, he was a sensation of his day. If he were here today, he would probably have overshadowed even the Gupatas in terms of press coverage.

Not just because he was a strange, eccentric guy who wore very strange clothes and had an odd diet. But people came to him, and he was a sensation because of his message.

His message was what attracted people to him. You see, it had been about, at this time in John, it had been about 400 years since the last prophet of Israel had spoken God's words.

And ever since then, 400 years before, God had literally gone silent. There had been no word from God. And during that time, the Romans had come and taken over, and Israel had lost the glory that they once had.

[3 : 29] And they really had thought God had abandoned them. Not only had he gone silent, but he had just left them. But then, all of a sudden, arrives this prophet, again, John the Baptist. And he begins his ministry as a new prophet of Israel.

He had many similarities, in fact, to the Old Testament prophets, which the people would have recognized. And so you can imagine the stir of this cause. After 400 years of God not speaking, now suddenly, a new prophet arises.

This is not just some interesting preacher that people went to to get some kind of uplifting message for the week. No. In fact, his message was far from uplifting. It was hard to take most of the time.

But people still flocked to him. Why? Well, because they wondered. Could it be that God is speaking to us again? And so John was headline news. And rumors were floating around that more than a prophet, he might even be the promised Messiah, the rescuer that God had promised centuries before to his people.

And so even, as you can imagine, the government took interest. And they sent representatives to John to question him, which is the conversation that's recorded here for us in John 1, verse 19.

[4 : 39] So have a look in your Bibles. Now, this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, I am not the Messiah.

They asked him, then who are you? Are you Elijah? Now, that's a fair question, by the way. Elijah was an Old Testament prophet who famously never died.

He was just taken by God. He disappeared one day. And they're thinking maybe it's him returned. But again, he said, no, I'm not. So they said, are you the prophet? Now, the prophet is another Old Testament figure predicted by Moses to come and lead the people of Israel.

And they thought, well, maybe he's the prophet. But again, he says, no. So John actually denies being anything that the people are hoping he is. So who is he?

Well, look at verse 22. Finally, they said, who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself? John replied in the words of Isaiah, the prophet.

[5 : 42] I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness. Make straight the way for the Lord. In other words, John's ministry, the reason he came wasn't to draw attention to himself, but to help people to get ready for God.

The message he brought, make straight the way for the Lord. What does he mean? Well, you see, in those days, you didn't have tarred roads and public maintenance programs.

And so the roads are pretty bad at the best of times in the ancient world. But every so often, a king or prince would come to visit one of his towns. And he would send a herald before he arrived there to go ahead of him and tell the townsfolk to get ready for this dignitary that's coming.

And they would tell the people to make straight the way for this king to arrive or this prince. In other words, they would need to go fix up their roads. They would need to get a welcoming committee together.

And they would especially need to remove any rocks or obstacles or fill out any potholes. Anything that would impede the dignitary from arriving in their town.

[6 : 55] And you see, that's the role that John is taking here. He's taking this role of a herald coming to the people to announce the arrival of a king and telling people to get ready, to clear a path for this king to arrive.

And so how does John do this? How does John help people to get ready for God? Well, there's at least three things I want to see about John the Baptist. The things that he does to get people ready for God.

So let's see what they are. Firstly, he fulfills prophecy. That's the first way he convinces people to listen to him and to get ready for God. You see, when John described who he was, he was quoting the words of the prophet Isaiah, we're told.

Now, it's important, if ever you come across an Old Testament quotation in the New Testament, it's important to go back and read that section in the Old Testament and understand what that's talking about.

Because when the Old Testament was quoted, it wasn't just plucking verses out of context and applying them to the situation. It was people knew their Old Testaments, and John wanted people to think back to what Isaiah was saying, what he was meaning, to help them understand who he was.

[8 : 05] So he was quoting these words from Isaiah. Now, Isaiah prophesied about 800 years before John, and his message was a message of warning to God's people to turn from their sinful lifestyles that they'd started slipping into.

Or, he warned, God would leave them, and they would be conquered by enemies and taken into captivity. Of course, they ignored Isaiah's warnings, mostly.

And long story short, they didn't listen, and a few centuries later, everything that Isaiah said came to pass. Israel and Judah were defeated by the Assyrians and the Babylonians and taken from their homes into exile in a faraway land.

But, that wasn't the end of the story. You see, Isaiah goes on. And from chapter 40 of Isaiah, kind of in the middle of the book, there's a huge change of tone.

Because not only at the beginning was Isaiah foretelling the withdrawing of God from Israel, and the defeat and the exile of God's people, but he also said, from verse 40 onwards, that all of this, all of this punishment and this suffering would lead God's people to true repentance, and that God would then come back to them.

[9 : 20] So it was a message of judgment, but it was also a message of hope. That God wouldn't totally abandon his people, but he would keep his promises to save them and return to them.

And it's here, in chapter 40 of Isaiah, is him describing this total change of tone, that this message of hope begins.

So listen to how he describes this return of God to his people from Isaiah 40. 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 people will see it together, for the mouth of the Lord is spoken.

Then from verse 9, You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout. Lift it up, and do not be afraid.

[10 : 20] Say to the towns of Judah, here is your God. Well, here is John the Baptist, 800 years after those words were written, and claiming that he is now fulfilling them.

That he is the voice. He is this herald whose job it is to announce God is coming back to his people. In other words, now this is very important to realize, by quoting this passage from Isaiah, he is saying to these Israelites, that the exile is now over.

That God is coming to bring you back into right relationship with him. Which immediately would have struck those people listening to him as strange. Because technically, the exile had already ended 500 years before.

When Persia defeated the Babylonians, and allowed the Jews to return home. You can read about that in Ezra and Nehemiah. And so they had already, the exile was already over. They had already half a millennium before, five centuries before.

They had already come home. And that's what's important to realize about what John is saying here. He is saying essentially to these Israelites, you think the exile is over because you've come back to your homes.

[11 : 35] But it wasn't ever over because God hasn't yet come back to you. Your true exile wasn't separation from your homes and your lifestyle in Israel.

Your true exile was separation from your God. And the exile will only be truly over when God comes back. That is what John is saying by quoting this passage from Isaiah.

And God is about to come back, he says. And so that's the first thing that John did to prepare people for God's arrival. He showed people, by quoting Isaiah, that they were still in exile.

That despite them being back in Israel, and despite all their religion, they were still separated from God. Just because you have religion, doesn't mean you have God.

That's a very important message, not just in Isaiah's age, and not just in John's age, but in our age as well. Just because you have religion, doesn't mean you have God.

[12 : 35] And that's what John came to tell these people. Secondly, though, second thing he did to prepare people for God's arrival is that he called people to repentance.

So these words that John said, make straight the way for the Lord, were not just to show people that he's fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy, but were also an instruction to them what to do then, now that God was finally coming to them.

They had to prepare a way for God. In other words, like people needed to do for a visiting dignitary, they needed to remove everything that would stop God from arriving.

Now that, of course, wasn't talking about physical stones and potholes and stuff in the road, it was talking about the sin in the people's hearts, not the rocks in their roads.

The sin in their hearts was what was going to stop God from coming back to them. And that's what the original readers of Isaiah would have understood when he said, prepare a way for the Lord.

[13 : 37] In order to return from the exile, they first needed to get rid of all the sins that got them into exile in the first place. So John's call to the people was a call to repentance, to change their ways, to turn around, a call to recognize and rid themselves of the sins that inhabited their hearts that separated them from God.

And that was the purpose of his baptism. Which, by the way, John's baptism, we learn in Acts, was different to Christian baptism, the baptism that Jesus issued in the Great Commission.

John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. It was a sign that people undertook individually and deliberately when they confessed and repented of their sins. Christian baptism is just that but a step further because then we have the assurance of forgiveness.

But the people then didn't have it. They still needed God to come. They didn't know what he was going to do. But the first thing they needed was they needed to repent before he came.

And so that's the second thing John did to help people prepare. He called them to repentance. But then there was one last thing that John needed to do to prepare people for God's arrival and that is to point out the way that God had chosen to arrive to earth which we saw last week was in the person of his son Jesus Christ.

[15 : 02] And so that's the third thing that John does here. He draws attention to Jesus. And he needs to draw attention to this man Jesus because people assumed you see when God arrived like he said he was going to then they'd immediately know.

They'd immediately see it. They'd know that he's here. It would be obvious. And that's what you'd think if God arrives to earth. But John says no. That's the thing. He's actually right amongst you and you haven't realized it yet.

And so that's why I'm here says John. To show you not just how to prepare for him to come but how to recognize him now that he's here. And so in your Bible look what he says from verse 29.

Look how he draws attention to Jesus. The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said look the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

This is the one I meant when I said a man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me. I myself did not know him but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.

[16 : 09] Then John gave this testimony. I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. And I myself did not know him but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me the man on who you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

I've seen and I testify that this is God's chosen one. Okay so there are at least three things here that John reveals about Jesus.

Firstly verse 29 he reveals that he is the Lamb of God which is a strange title but it refers to the sacrificial lambs of Jewish ceremonies.

Every Jew would have known what a lamb symbolized what it signified. The lambs were what they brought to make sacrifices at the temple. And so John is effectively saying that in order for God to come and take up residence with you a sacrifice for sin needs to happen first and that is what Jesus has come to do.

Now it's remarkable that John would know this way before it became clear what Jesus had come to do John already knew it probably because God had revealed it supernaturally to him as a prophet.

[17 : 24] And he probably didn't even quite know what he was talking about. And yet it's right here in the first chapter of the gospel of John that he gives this revelation of why Jesus has come to earth to be the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world to die to be a sacrifice which is unthinkable that God would do that.

But it was the only way that a way could be made for God to come back to people. And it was the only way for this broken relationship that sin had spoiled between man and God the only way to heal that was the sacrifice for sin the ultimate sacrifice that all the other sacrifices in the Old Testament were pointing towards the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, the end of verse 33, what else do we learn about Jesus? That he came to baptize people with the Holy Spirit, John says. And so he's saying that the way God would come and take up residence with his people was not like he did in the Old Testament when his glory dwelt in the temple and very few people could approach it.

Now, the means by which God is going to dwell with his people is through his Holy Spirit living in their hearts. much closer, much more intimate relationship than they had ever known with God.

So that's the second thing. The third thing that John reveals about Jesus right at the end, verse 34, is that Jesus is God's chosen one or the Son of God depending on your translation.

[19 : 03] The chosen one was another prophecy in Isaiah about a man that God would send to bring justice to the nations. But as the Son of God, he's not just a man, he is God himself.

And so, John reveals a whole lot about Jesus in these few verses to help people to see the way that God would come to them. And so, the point of John saying all this is to show, effectively, that Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy that God is returning to his people.

This is the way that God is returning to people. The people who have been put into exile, are people who have been separated from God because of their sin. God is coming back and the way he's coming back is through this man, Jesus.

And John is sent as a herald to announce this and help people to get ready. But what does that all mean for us today? You know, that was 2,000 years ago.

What does John, what did John's words, John the Baptist's words mean for us today? And as we go into a new week and as we go about life, what bearing does it have for any of us?

[20 : 11] Well, you see, just as people then needed to prepare themselves for the arrival of God individually and deliberately, each of us needs to prepare individually and deliberately for the arrival of God into our lives.

if he's really going to take up residence in your life and in my life. How do we do that? How do we get ready for God to dwell and take up residence in our lives?

Well, the same way that they had to back then. Firstly, by realizing that even we are by nature in exile from God. By ourselves, we are far away from God by default.

We are in exile. We are born in exile from God. Separated. And sadly, we get so used to that that we forget that something's wrong.

But I wonder if you feel a little bit of that exile in your life. I wonder if you feel at times that your life is just not what it should be.

[21 : 20] You feel that? I wonder if you're unsatisfied, you're unsettled, you're worried, you feel that you want a better life.

Is that you this morning? Or at times? Maybe this week to come you'll feel that? See, we all feel these remnants of being exiles from God. Exiles from the life that God intended for us.

Exiles from the world that God intended for us. I think everybody feels to a greater or lesser degree these things because we live in a broken world.

We are exiles from God by nature. But that's, you see, why Isaiah's message to the Israelites in exile is just as important for us today. Because Isaiah was saying your true exile, the reason you feel this way, is that you're separated from God.

And you'll never come out of exile unless you come back to God in real relationship. So how do you do that? Well, you repent. That's John's message to the people.

[22 : 26] How do you prepare for God? You repent. Just as before coming out of exile, the Israelites needed to recognize and turn from the sins that got them into exile, so each one of us needs to admit that we're sinners.

And we need to admit that it is our sins, our individual personal sins, not just the general sin in the world, but our sins. My sins and your sins have separated us from God by nature.

And then we need to resolve to clean house, with God's help to rid our lives of all that offends him.

But that's not all. Finally, we need more than anything to recognize Jesus, which is the third thing that John did for these people. Because you see, no amount of us trying to stop sinning will pay for the sins we've already committed and will perfectly prevent us from not sinning in the future.

Only the Lamb of God, who brings and baptizes with the Holy Spirit, can do that, can forgive us for our past sins, and can help us by his power to turn away from sin in the future.

[23 : 35] So have you recognized who he is, and have you recognized how much you need him? Have you realized that you need, more than anything, Jesus to take away your sins that separate you from God?

And have you realized that he and he alone is the way you can receive God's Holy Spirit to come and make a home in your life? And so to close this morning I must ask you, have you prepared for God to arrive?

Have you prepared your life for God to take residence? Or do you still need to? If you haven't, if you're still in exile and you know it, you still feel your exile from God, you feel far from God, he doesn't feature in your daily life, you're not in close personal relationship with him, well then don't waste any time because Jesus has done everything that's needed to pay for your sins, to bring you out of exile, to bring you back into real living, active relationship with God, and now all you need to do is turn from your sin and receive God's Spirit in your life by coming to Christ and asking him to forgive you through his death on the cross and asking him to give you his Holy Spirit.

and he promises all who repent and believe in him will receive his Holy Spirit. Have you done that? Well if you haven't, please come speak to me, please make an appointment with me.

Don't waste any time, life is uncertain. But maybe, and I hope you have done that, I hope you do have that close personal relationship with God that Jesus came to bring, I hope you are out of exile, but then even then you've also got to realize that repentance is not a once-off thing.

[25 : 23] Cleaning house is not a once-off thing. Just because you may have cleaned house once doesn't mean it'll never get messy again. I mean, you can't get away with cleaning your house once every five years, can you?

Or just cleaning your house once when you arrive there and you think it's done, you never have to clean up again. That's ridiculous. But we think that about repentance, we think, oh I've repented, I've turned from my sins and I can relax now.

to keep on cleaning the sin out of our hearts. You see, this process of cleaning house to make it suitable for God to dwell in is an ongoing process of identifying and turning from the sins that hinder our walk with Him.

And you know what those sins are. You don't have to come to me and have a counseling session for me to tell you the sins in your life which are hindering your relationship with God. You know what they are. We need to clean them out.

You know what are the sins that are hindering the work of God's Spirit in your life. We need to clean them out. And just as with cleaning your house, you may have noticed, it's best done on a daily basis rather than waiting for it to accumulate.

[26 : 29] So it is with the sins in our lives. So it is with those things that are causing an impediment to our relationship with God. And so will you, no matter how long you've been a Christian, will you ensure that daily you are making way for God?

in your life. And asking yourself whether your life as it stands at the moment is a suitable dwelling place for God. Or whether perhaps you still need some cleaning up to do.

Let's pray. Yes Lord, we thank you for sending this man John the Baptist, this prophet, to prepare the way for Jesus. And Lord, just as he prepared the way for Jesus to come when he came to earth, we pray that your word would prepare the way in our hearts for Jesus to come and to dwell and to live without our sins impeding him from working in our lives and making us the people that you created and saved us to be.

And so Lord, help us, help us daily to repent, help us daily to make way for you to dwell and to rule. and we pray that by your grace, you would dwell and rule in our hearts.

In Jesus' name. Amen.