

# CALLED TO PREPARE

**DEVOTIONAL READING:** John 1:19-34  
**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Matthew 3  
**TODAY'S SCRIPTURE:** Matthew 3:1-12

## I. Called to Testify

### Matthew 3:1-4

**1 In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea,**

**2 And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.**

**3 For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.**

**4 And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey.**

1. The phrase *those days* moves Matthew's story from the events of Jesus' birth and early childhood to a period some two decades later. During this time, Jesus' cousin *John*, the son of a priest from the Judean hill country, came to adulthood with a distinct sense of mission and calling of his own. At some point John adopted an ascetic lifestyle and began to live alone *in the wilderness of Judaea*.

2. John's message can be summarized in a single word: *Repent*. The person who repents becomes truly sorry for past misdeeds, changes the way they think and, as a result, starts behaving differently.

The immediate need for repentance was indicated by the fact that *the kingdom of heaven* was *at hand*. Jews would have understood that phrase both temporally (as already present or coming soon) and geographically (as coming to Israel). As sovereign Creator of the universe, God is always king over everything. But His reign was about to become evident in a unique way. Repentance would make the people ready to stand in the king's presence when He arrived.

The Jewish people had not had their own, sovereign nation since the exile of 586 BC. The people were looking for God to expel the foreign rulers in preparation to reestablish the throne of David. What God had in mind required different preparation than ridding the nation of outsiders, however. His spiritual kingdom required not a change of personnel, but a change of heart.

Here as elsewhere, Matthew uses the phrase *kingdom of heaven*, while Mark and Luke prefer "kingdom of God." *Heaven* in this context is most likely a gesture of respect to avoid saying God's name.

3. John earned the title *the voice of one crying in the wilderness* from prophecy spoken by *Esaias* (Isaiah 40:3). In its original context, the prophecy envisions God as a great king on a journey, with

messengers and servants preceding Him to make people ready for His arrival. John the Baptist considered himself one of these messengers, announcing that the great king, *the Lord*, would soon appear. Repentance would *make* things *straight* in preparing the people for the king's arrival.

4a. John's attire of rough clothing and sparse diet reflected his ascetic lifestyle. More significantly, John's choice of clothing recalls that of the great prophet Elijah (see 2 Kings 1:8). According to Malachi 4:5-6, Elijah would return one day to call the Jews to repentance before the day of judgment. John fulfilled that task in unexpected fashion.

4b. *Locusts* were clean foods according to Leviticus 11:22, readily found in the wilderness. *Honey* was a key descriptor regarding the abundance of the promised land. John lived off the land, sustained by the two foods God provided.

## II. Called to Repent

### Matthew 3:5-10

**5 Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan,**

**6 And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.**

**7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?**

**8 Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance:**

**9 And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.**

**10 And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good**

**fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.**

5. *Judaea* was the Roman province in which the city of *Jerusalem* was located; *the region round about the Jordan River* extended northward into Galilee, Jesus' home territory. Since John performed no miracles, his fame as a prophet must have been based on the integrity of his lifestyle and the nature of his message.

6a. Jews were aware of the symbolism of the *Jordan River*. Generations before, Joshua had led the Israelites across the Jordan to claim the promised land. Now John was symbolically preparing Israel for the kingdom of Heaven, whose leader was much greater than any who had come before.

6b. The types of *sins* that concerned John are hinted at in Luke 3:10-14. The very notion of the kingdom of Heaven assumes that God is a sovereign ruler who must be obeyed. *Confessing* that one's life was not completely submitted to God was essential to the repentance that John called for in preparation.

7. Some religious leaders of the day doubtless accepted John's message. But appearances of *Pharisees and Sadducees* rarely led to positive encounters with either Jesus or John. Because Jewish thought viewed washing purification as something that happened through rituals of personal cleansing, the leading priests and rabbis challenged John's authority to baptize. He replied with a challenge of his own, publicly identifying them as *vipers*. Like poisonous snakes, they hid their intentions from the masses so they could harm them. Their status as the religious elite would not exempt them from judgment, *God's wrath to come*.

8. John uses the common New Testament metaphor of *fruits* to describe behavior based on belief (examples: John

15:16; Romans 7:4-5). Exactly what this fruit would look like is not specified.

The characteristic behavior of the religious elite—ignoring John’s message and instead challenging his authority to preach and baptize—demonstrated that they themselves were as much in need of *repentance* as the masses they instructed.

9. Many Jews of John’s day believed they would receive the promises made to *Abraham* their *father* simply by virtue of being part of the family of God’s covenant people. John challenged this line of thinking. Being descended from Abraham was not proof of being in a right relationship with God. One had to seek God earnestly.

10. John used a dramatic analogy to drive his point home: the barren *trees* that should be bearing *good fruit* have been marked for destruction. Without a change of heart, these barren trees would become firewood. God is patient, but His patience has limits. Those who accepted John’s message would be prepared for what (and who) was coming. Those who did not would not participate in God’s kingdom, regardless of their lineage or religious standing.

### III. Called to Prepare Matthew 3:11-12

11 I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire:

12 Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

11a. John viewed the act of submitting to *water* baptism as evidence of *repentance*. Those undergoing this baptism

were admitting that they needed to be cleansed of sinfulness. They needed to begin producing the kind of fruit that John called for.

11b. John’s baptism was not an end in and of itself; rather, it looked to the future. John was the Messiah’s forerunner. John’s baptism would give way to the baptism Jesus would bring.

Two actions by God lay ahead. First was the blessing that came on the Day of Pentecost when Peter preached the first post-resurrection gospel sermon. That message included the directive to “repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of *the Holy Ghost*” (Acts 2:38).

Second, John predicted a *fire* to come. Some see this as judgment on the disobedient. Others, however, see it as a purifying fire for the repentant.

The one to bring about such things is the Messiah. John, as a lowly servant, felt unworthy even to *bear* Jesus’ *shoes*. Jesus’ ministry would be greater than John’s.

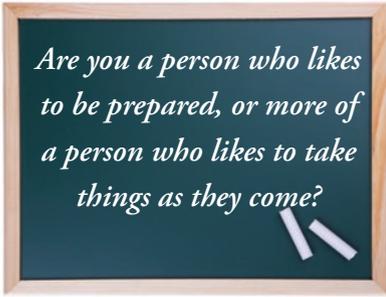
12. *Chaff* is the outer husk that surrounds seeds of wheat. In antiquity, the husk was separated from the grain by tossing the wheat into the air; the chaff would drift to the side while the heavier seed fell in a pile on the threshing floor. The worthless chaff was then burned. God’s *unquenchable fire* would be even more thorough in removing those who refused to repent.

John had begun the work of separation by calling people to repent in preparation for the Lord’s coming. Even today, those who repent and follow the biblical plan of salvation will be gathered up like the good grain. But those who do not will, like the useless chaff, be discarded and destroyed. The message is clear: choose your fate and act accordingly before it is too late.

# INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

## CALLED TO PREPARE

### Into the Lesson



Imagine you are preparing for a job interview. Create a list of ways you would prepare for the interview.

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### Into Life

*hypocrisy / cunning / wicked ways / attention to outward appearances*

List an attitude you may have that falls into one or more of the categories listed above—an attitude that works against preparing for Jesus’ return.

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Put your paper in a place where it will remind you daily to ask God for His help in correcting that attitude.

In your life, continue to prepare well for Jesus’ second coming.

### Into the Word

Read Matthew 3:1-12 and answer the following questions:

Who was John the Baptist? \_\_\_\_\_

What do we know about him? \_\_\_\_\_

What significant things did he say? \_\_\_\_\_

What significant things did he do? \_\_\_\_\_

Fill out the following chart based on Matthew 3:11-12

	Baptism by John	Baptism from Jesus
Who’s it for		
What it does		
When it happens		

## THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

The time to repent is now.