

THE GOSPEL PROJECT

# UNIT 20 THE PREPARATION



MATTHEW; LUKE; JOHN



MEMORY VERSES

“The devil said to him, ‘I will give you their splendor and all this authority, because it has been given over to me, and I can give it to anyone I want. If you, then, will worship me, all will be yours.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘It is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

–Luke 4:6-8



# JOHN PREPARED THE WAY

CORE PASSAGE: MATTHEW 3:1-12

## CONTEXT

Following the close of the Old Testament's inspiration and revelation, God was silent for over four hundred years. Then the angel Gabriel appeared to an old priest in Jerusalem and a young girl in Nazareth, informing them that God had not forgotten His promises. Decades later, John the Baptist, the surprise son of the priest, went into the wilderness to call people to repentance to prepare the way for the Messiah, the miraculous son of the young girl.

## KEY CONCEPT

**Following Jesus requires confession, repentance, and yielding to the work of the Holy Spirit.**

As you examine Matthew 3:1-12:

- Notice that John the Baptist prepared the way for the Messiah by calling people to repentance.
- Reflect on John's humility in pointing toward Jesus, who was more powerful and more worthy.



## TIMELINE

John the Baptist Is Born to Prepare the Way for the Messiah (Luke 1:57-80)

**SESSION STUDY:**  
John the Baptist Calls People to Repentance in Preparation for Jesus (Matthew 3:1-12)

Jesus Is Tempted in the Wilderness (Luke 4:1-13)

Jesus, the Son of God, Is Born and Grows in Favor with God and Man (Luke 2:1-52)

John Baptizes Jesus in the Jordan River (Matthew 3:13-17)

### Daily Readings

- Day 1:** Mark 1:1-8
- Day 2:** Luke 3:1-14
- Day 3:** Luke 3:15-20
- Day 4:** Matthew 3:1-6
- Day 5:** Matthew 3:7-12
- Day 6:** Psalm 139



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

## CONFESSION, REPENTANCE, AND BAPTISM ARE PART OF A BELIEVER'S JOURNEY (MATTHEW 3:1-6).

**Circle the ways people demonstrated their repentance in this passage.**

**1** In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea **2** and saying, "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!" **3** For he is the one spoken of through the prophet Isaiah, who said: A voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight! **4** Now John had a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. **5** Then people from Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the vicinity of the Jordan were going out to him, **6** and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.

John the Baptist's words in Matthew 3:1-2 were both earth-shattering and life-giving. The news of Jesus's arrival was more than a mere announcement; it was a call to respond. The moment had arrived; the long-awaited Messiah had come to save God's people from their sins. What was required now was the people's earnest confession and their heartfelt repentance.

John's message was plain in its content and yet rich in meaning and context. He proclaimed, "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!" (v. 2). John urged God's people to "repent," or "turn away," from their old, sinful ways of living. Jesus's arrival signified the in-breaking of God's kingdom predicted by Old Testament prophets centuries prior (v. 3). What is more, the coming of the Messiah represented not only a new chapter in redemptive history but also a new way of life for those who will trust and follow Him.

**Why should repentance be a response to hearing the news of God's kingdom coming near?**

John the Baptist was unconventional in his style of dress and dietary habits (v. 4). Yet in keeping with a pattern held throughout the Scriptures, God chose and used this unlikely individual to do incredible things for His kingdom.

**LEADER NOTE:** During a time when Jesus rebuked religious leaders who took pride in their long robes and high status among the people (Mark 12:38-40), John lived in the wilderness eating locusts and wild honey and dressing in camel's hair garments. John's behavior and dress brought to mind the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:8). Indeed, the prophet Malachi mentioned that God would send a prophet in the spirit of Elijah to prepare the way of the Lord (Mal. 4:5-6).

**Key Concept:** Following Jesus requires confession, repentance, and yielding to the work of the Holy Spirit.

John announced the arrival of the Messiah, and as droves of people began responding favorably to his message, he ministered to them, baptizing them in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins (vv. 5-6).

**LEADER NOTE:** John's baptism in Matthew 3 should not be confused with the Christian baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that marks off believers in Jesus after His crucifixion and resurrection. John's baptism here was closer to a ritual a Gentile would go through to identify with and join the people of Israel. Essentially, John was declaring that a Jew's heritage and obedience wouldn't save him; rather, the Lord looks favorably upon a person with a contrite and repentant heart.<sup>1</sup>

#### VOICES FROM CHURCH HISTORY

"The force of that verb, repent, is no mere hat tip to the holiness of God with a mere acknowledgment of one's sin. The call here is to radical conversion—to turn from sin and intoxication with this world and direct one's soul and heart to the things of God."<sup>2</sup>

—R. C. Sproul (1939–2017)

In our day, the content of the gospel message and the urgent call to repentance remain the same. First John 1:9 reminds us that if we confess our sins, God is faithful to forgive us. In addition, we observe in Matthew 3 a precursor of the pattern new believers follow. After confessing our sins and trusting Christ for salvation, we follow through with Christian baptism, outwardly professing to the world what God by His Spirit has accomplished inwardly (Acts 2:38).

**What is the relationship between repentance and confession of sins?**

#### GOSPEL CONNECTION

John was the prophesied messenger calling out in the wilderness, preparing hearts to repent and believe in the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Notes

### THOSE WHO TRUST IN JESUS WILL BE GIVEN THE HOLY SPIRIT (MATTHEW 3:7-12).

**Underline words or phrases that speak about the Pharisees and Sadducees and what will happen to them.**

**7** When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? **8** Therefore produce fruit consistent with repentance. **9** 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. **10** The ax 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. **11** I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I. I am not worthy to remove his sandals. He himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. **12** His winnowing shovel 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.”

Not all who responded to John’s message responded in faith. The Pharisees and Sadducees were groups of Jewish religious leaders who prioritized strict adherence to the written law and often opposed the work of Jesus’s followers. When the groups arrived to observe John baptizing new followers, John immediately addressed their insincerity and questioned their motives.

These groups were well-studied in the Scriptures and came from rich religious traditions. They also were intrigued by the excitement surrounding John’s announcement. Yet they were not truly sorrowful over the sinful condition of their hearts, nor did they genuinely desire to turn from their sin and place their faith in the coming Messiah. Their sin included pride and a lack of love for those less fortunate. John warned the groups not to assume their religious tradition and lineage would save them from God’s impending wrath (vv. 8-9). They would need to demonstrate a true change of heart, evidenced by the “fruit” of changed lives (v. 8), even though from the outside it may have seemed like were God-fearers.

**LEADER NOTE:** The Sadducees were Jewish aristocrats who believed only the first five books of the Bible were authoritative. The Pharisees accepted the authority of all the Old Testament writings, and they also believed in the resurrection, angels, and demons, contrary to the Sadducees. Both groups often argued with Jesus and demanded a sign of His authority to perform miracles or to preach. They were the religious leaders of the day and seen as those to look to for moral authority. But Jesus knew their hearts were hard and prideful.

**Why should we not minimize the severity of sin (especially ones surrounding the corruption of the heart), and God’s response to it?**

As has been demonstrated throughout the Scriptures, God will not be mocked, nor does He deal gently with those who come to Him dishonestly. John reminded the two groups of this fact and pointed to the greater story unfolding around them. There was no question: God will judge those who remain unrepentant in their sin (vv. 10,12). The need of the hour—this very hour—is the need to turn from sin and turn to Christ.

But John’s ministry was a precursor to the ministry of someone even greater who had now come—Jesus, the promised Messiah. While baptism with water, performed by John, served as an outward sign of inward change, faith in Jesus results in God granting to believers the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (v. 11). In contrast to outward conformity and external conditions, it is the presence of the Spirit and His “fruit” in one’s life that characterizes true belief.

**LEADER NOTE:** Fruit is often used as a metaphor for the evidence of true faith (Matt. 3:10; 7:17-19; John 15:2-5; Gal. 5:22-23; Eph. 5:9-10; Jas. 3:17). In an agricultural setting, John and Jesus’s audience would easily understand that only healthy, mature trees produce good fruit. The Holy Spirit dwells within each believer and helps us grow into Christ-likeness as we participate in spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Bible study, fellowship, evangelism, and more.

**What “fruit” would you expect to see from a believer in Jesus because of the Holy Spirit’s presence?**

**THEOLOGY CONNECTION**

**BAPTISM:** Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer’s faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Savior, the believer’s death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead. Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord’s Supper.

**ARRIVAL**

**INTERACT:** As the group arrives, invite them to share how they prepare for the arrival of an important guest. Do they have a certain routine? Do they like to plan ahead, or do they prefer to plan just before time? How is preparing for the arrival of an important guest different from preparing for the arrival of someone you know well?

**TRANSITION:** Most of us would go to great lengths to make preparations for the arrival of an important guest. And when the most important person in human history—the Messiah—was due to arrive, God raised up John the Baptist to prepare His way with the people.

**CONTEXT**

**SAY:** God's purpose for John's ministry was to pave the way for Jesus. John was tasked with exhorting people to turn to God. The Jewish people had not had a fresh revelation from God in a few centuries. In that time, they became heavily focused on obtaining independence from Rome. Military prowess and a strong national identity had become more important than having a heart of obedience toward the Lord. God used John to remind the Jews that a broken heart and a contrite spirit were what He desired (Ps. 51:17).

**RECAP**

**RECAP:** Invite a couple of volunteers to share a key idea that stood out to them as they prepared this week.

**SAY:** John the Baptist knew that his purpose was to prepare the way for the Messiah. Prior to the beginning of Jesus's ministry, John became a well-known preacher as he went throughout the wilderness of Judea preaching of the need for repentance. Many people's hearts were stirred to hear his message as people from all over the area came to hear him preach and were baptized.

**TRANSITION:** Today we are going to discuss our need to prepare our hearts through confession, repentance, and obedience to His direction for Jesus to have His way in our lives. From here, let's list ways that John prepared the way for Jesus.



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**Key Concept:** Following Jesus requires confession, repentance, and yielding to the work of the Holy Spirit.

## GROUP ACTIVITY

**LIST:** Direct the group to page 58 in the Personal Study Guide (PSG), where they will find the activity titled “Preparing for Jesus.” Recreate this list on a board in the room and record the group’s findings as they discuss the Scripture text.

Notes

### Preparing for Jesus

Using Matthew 3:1-12, write down ways John prepared the people for Jesus. Reflect on how preparation of our hearts matters when approaching God.

MATTHEW 3:1-2

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MATTHEW 3:5-10

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MATTHEW 3:11

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MATTHEW 3:12

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 3:1-12.

**ENGAGE:** Using verses 1-2, encourage the group to discuss what John meant by saying people should repent because the kingdom of heaven is near. (*Jesus represented the kingdom of heaven in coming to earth, so John was signifying that Jesus’s ministry was about to begin.*) Write down their thoughts on the board. Ask: “Why is repentance necessary for us to come near to God? How do confession and repentance pave the way for God to work in our hearts?”

**DIRECT:** Using verses 5-10, lead the group to review how people responded to John’s preaching and how he encouraged them to confess their sin. Discuss that baptism in Jesus’s time was generally used for Gentiles who wanted to convert to the Jewish faith, yet John preached that the Jews also needed to repent and be baptized.

**SAY:** Sin separates us from God, but drawing near to God through confessing our sins and turning the other direction in faith prepares the way for God

to work in our hearts. As we submit to Him, He will begin to direct our lives according to His plan. He will reveal to us His purpose for us. Ultimately that purpose is to help spread His kingdom on earth.

**DISCUSS:** Using verse 11, lead the group to consider the importance of Christian baptism as an outward symbol of what the Holy Spirit is doing on the inside. Say: “Baptism is an important step of obedience in the life of every believer, but it is not what saves. Only faith in Jesus saves.”

**ENGAGE:** Using verse 12, invite your group to focus on John’s paramount mission: to point people to Jesus. Say: “As believers, we know that when Jesus comes again, He will come in judgment. So while we wait for Jesus to return, we must spread the gospel with urgency as John did.”

### DEBRIEF

**What are ways we can assess the condition of our heart so that we can repent of what might be corrupted there?**

### SUMMARIZE

John the Baptist preached that God’s kingdom was at hand. God’s kingdom includes His presence, both in the incarnation of Jesus Christ and in His presence now dwelling in the hearts of Christians through the power of the Holy Spirit. Having heard, believed, and experienced this good news, we believers should have a heart of repentance over our sin even as we call others to repent and believe in Jesus, who embodied God’s kingdom on earth.

### HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 59). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Heart** section in this week’s study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



**HEAD:** Upon hearing the gospel, we are confronted with the Bible’s description of the sinful state of our own hearts. John the Baptist, and ultimately Jesus, offered the solution to our sin problem: repent. Instead of resting on their identity as children of Abraham, John told his listeners to recognize their need for the coming Savior.

**What are some obstacles that may keep people from repenting of their sin?**



**HEART:** Confession of sin and proclaiming Christ as Savior involve more than merely a change of mind; our affections must begin to change too. In a world that tempts us to love the things it loves, the Holy Spirit encourages us to love the things God loves and to resist the things that displease God.

**How will you pray for the Lord to change your affections so that you love Christ more than your sin?**

**Key Concept:** Following Jesus requires confession, repentance, and yielding to the work of the Holy Spirit.



**HANDS:** It is not enough merely to know what repentance is or to know that we should confess. The practice of confession should be a regular rhythm within the Christian life. A mature, godly friend could be a listening ear and a source of encouragement as you follow Christ.

**What steps will you take to repent of and combat sin in your life?**

### NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this week's session.

- Read John 1:1-18 and reflect on the moment you repented and believed in Jesus. Consider your current relationship with Christ and ask God to reveal to you any areas in which you need to confess and repent.
- Read Matthew 6:9-13. Consider how you need to pray for and respond to God's kingdom and your struggle with various temptations.
- Reflect on how you are actively participating in spreading God's kingdom on earth. How can you focus more on spreading the good news of Jesus Christ?

Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 59 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

### PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

### PRAYING SCRIPTURE

**CLOSE:** Pray through Psalm 139:23-24 with your group, leading them to pray for the Lord to identify their sinful ways so they can confess them and repent and obey the Lord more faithfully.

#### References

1. Craig L. Blomberg, Matthew, vol. 22, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992) [Logos].
2. R. C. Sproul, Matthew, St. Andrew's Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 41.

Notes

