THE WAY PREPARED

Matthew 3:1-12.

Matthew is one of the four Gospels in the Bible. The Gospels tell us about the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. So, why do we have four different Gospels? Each Gospel writer had a different purpose for writing. They originally had different audiences. Therefore, each of the writers stresses different aspects of who Jesus is.

Matthew’s Gospel targets a Jewish audience. His purpose is to explain that Jesus was the promised Messiah of the O.T. Matthew emphasizes the words of the Lord regarding the Kingdom of Heaven. He does this to counter the popular Jewish belief of his day that the Messiah would be a military leader who would come and overthrow the Roman occupation and re–establish the throne of David. Matthew stresses thorough subjection and obedience to the sovereign AUTHORITY of the Lord Jesus.

Mark’s Gospel describes in detail Jewish customs and is, therefore, thought to be aimed at a mostly non–Jewish audience (in particular the Romans). Mark vividly describes many of the miracles of Jesus. He details the crucifixion and death of Jesus. Many scholars believe that Mark’s account was taken from the Apostle Peter, because many of the events recorded were unique to Peter. Mark stresses the SERVANT character of the Lord Jesus, who is to be followed as our Example.

Luke’s Gospel gives us the most complete look at the life of Jesus. Luke, a Gentile writer is writing to Theophilus, also a Gentile. He uses various eyewitnesses as sources for his account. Luke stresses Jesus’ humanity (since Luke was a doctor himself) and compassion. It is the GRACE of the Lord Jesus that Luke brings out. Jesus’ grace was not only to the nation of Israel, but to Gentiles as well. This can be seen in the parables and miracles of Jesus that Luke records.

John’s Gospel was the last of the gospels to be written. John writes during a time of growing apostasy. His purpose is that his readers would believe that Jesus is the Son of God “and that believing you might have life in His name.” John records 8 signs to prove his point, the last of the signs being the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. John is the only one of the four Gospels that does not give any of Jesus’ parables. Instead John emphasizes Jesus as God in the flesh. In John the Lord Jesus manifests Himself as the Creator, the eternal, only begotten Son of God, sent from the Father to fully reveal His glory. Jesus is the LIGHT and LOVE of the eternal God.

I felt like it was important to give you a brief summary of the 4 Gospels – 4 perspectives on the life of Christ. But since we are going to be spending the next 3 months in Matthew’s Gospel, let me provide just a little more detail about it. The Gospel of Matthew was written primarily to the Jews to show that Jesus of Nazareth was the long-awaited Messiah-King – the One foretold by the O.T. prophets. Matthew makes 53 quotes and 76 other references to the O.T. Matthew is filled with Messianic language. "Son of David" is used throughout his gospel. The opening genealogy shows that Jesus was a direct descendant of both Abraham and David. Through both men ran the royal line of God's covenant promise. This was vitally important to the Jews. Some 22 times Matthew shows how Jesus fulfilled an O.T. prophecy concerning the Messiah. The prophets were convinced that God intended to set up an earthly kingdom under the rule of His Messiah who would lift Israel to glory and establish God's righteousness worldwide. But Matthew shows that God did not send Jesus initially to establish an earthly kingdom, but a heavenly one. His kingdom would be much greater than David's because it would never end.

A quick comment here so you know where I stand theologically – We know that when He came the first time that Jesus was rejected by the Jews as their King and He was crucified. The Bible tells us that Jesus will come back again and when He does He will establish an earthly kingdom. Would Jesus have set up His earthly kingdom if the nation of Israel had received Him as their King? Yes, but clearly His rejection by His own people was foretold by the prophets and by Jesus Himself. And all of this sovereignly worked into God’s ultimate plan of redemption.

One key message in Matthew is that Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. Jesus Himself said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17).

Finally, regarding the author and date of writing – the author is Matthew, also known as Levi. He was a Jewish tax collector (employed by the Romans) and was one of Jesus' 12 disciples. His Gospel account of the life of Christ was written prior to the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. We know this because in Matthew 24:1-2 the reference by Jesus to the destruction of the temple is yet future. Most scholars place the writing of Matthew’s Gospel in the mid to late 60’s A.D.

[the setting for today’s lesson is the wilderness of Judea – pictures]

READ Matt 3:1-3. The word “preaching” in verse 1 is the Greek word *kerusso* , meaning “to be a herald” or “to proclaim.” John the Baptist, then, is a herald. In those days it was the practice of a forerunner to go on ahead of a king, to announce his soon arrival, and to make sure the roadway was clear for the king’s entourage. In the same way John the Baptist has been sent by God as a herald announcing the coming of a king. What king was coming? JESUS. Hold on a minute – was Jesus a king? YES. We know this because In Chapter 1 Matthew establishes in the genealogy of Jesus (through Jesus’ earthly father Joseph) that Jesus has a claim to the throne of David. Jesus is a king because he is of the royal blood line. Not only that, Matthew includes the witness of wise men from the east in Chapter 2. Why did the wise men make their long journey? They came to worship a king, and that king was NOT King Herod. No, in the narrative we observe the wise men worshipping the Child Jesus. So in our passage here in Chapter 3, John the Baptist is heralding the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah King! And this was precisely what was foretold by the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 40:3, which Matthew quotes here.

Notice John’s message. It’s twofold – first, “repent” and then, second, get ready for the kingdom (“the kingdom of heaven is at hand”). It’s coming real soon! To repent means to turn around, to change one’s direction. The order here is important. We must deal with the sin in our lives before we can properly worship the King. This is exactly what Peter preached in Acts 3:19-20: “Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus.”

But repentance is not just turning FROM something, but it is turning TO something. I believe that Paul hits on this point in 2 Corinthians 7:1: “Since we have these promises, beloved (promises that God dwells in us and we have a relationship with Him), let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.” So repentance is a turning from our old sinful ways to a life marked by holiness. You could say that by his preaching John the Baptist is preparing the roadway for the King in the hearts of the people.

And what’s all this about the Kingdom of Heaven being “at hand”? What is John saying? God’s kingdom is coming real soon. How soon? Well, in verse 1 we are told that John the Baptist came and in verse 13 we are told “Then Jesus came…” So in a very real sense the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God will be ushered in with the coming of Jesus and, specifically, with the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. According to Peter in Acts 10:37 Jesus public ministry began with His baptism. That occurs at the end of Matthew Chapter 3. “Get ready, people, the King is coming!”

READ Matt 3:4. Let’s talk about John the Baptist. John was a remarkable man. In fact, Jesus calls him the greatest man who was ever born (Matthew 11:11). Can there be any higher praise than that? The physical description provided here is similar to that of the prophet Elijah in 2 Kings 1:8 (a hairy man with a leather belt). And that is not merely coincidence. John the Baptist is modeled after Elijah. Like Elijah, John the Baptist is a prophet. Matthew 21:26 says that the multitude held John to be a prophet. And like Elijah John the Baptist renounced all the luxuries that this world holds so dear for the sake of his calling to preach God’s message (even though it was not a popular message). John MacArthur says of John the Baptist: “he was a living protest against self-indulgence.”

The prophet Malachi predicted, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes” (Mal 4:4). In Luke 1:17 an angel of the Lord tells Zacharias (John’s father) that his son, John the Baptist, will be a forerunner before Him (the Messiah) “in the spirit and power of Elijah…” In Matthew 11:14 Jesus tells the people that John the Baptist is Elijah who was to come. In Matthew 17:12 Jesus, speaking of John the Baptist after he was killed by Herod, tells His disciples, “Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished…” John the Baptist was not actually Elijah – he said as much in John 1:19-23 when he was asked directly about this. But John the Baptist is certainly a fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy in that he serves as a type of Elijah. There is a strong connection between John the Baptist and Elijah. It is interesting that the last word in the O.T. is that one will come to prepare the way for the Messiah King and here at the beginning of the N.T. comes John the Baptist who is doing just that.

READ Matthew 3:5-6. Baptism was already a Jewish practice, but it was done exclusively to Gentile proselytes who followed the one true God and wanted to be a part of God’s covenant people. But here we see John baptizing everyone – both Jews and Gentiles – after they confessed their sins. John’s baptism signifies that a person has been totally converted, born again, and is starting afresh and anew. Repentance and confession of sins is a part of this process. And this is true even for Christians today.

READ Matthew 3:7-8. John, filled with the Spirit of God, can discern spiritual phoniness a mile away. And here come the Pharisees and Sadducees, the Jewish religious elite of his day. These two groups were quite different and they rarely saw eye to eye on spiritual matters. The Pharisees were Jewish patriots. They were opposed to the Roman occupation of their homeland. Religiously they were ultra conservative, very legalistic and, like Paul, they were zealous for the Law and their oral traditions. The Sadducees were of the wealthy priestly class. They knew how to play the political game with Rome and get what they wanted. They were willing to compromise. They were the religious liberals of their day, rationalistic in their thought, downplaying the spiritual and embracing the physical. They did not believe in the resurrection of the dead because such it defied all reasonable explanation. But they had one thing in common – and this is why John the Baptist and later Jesus lump them together – they believed you can obtain righteousness through human achievement.

Notice John’s direct approach. He is not very tactful or politically correct is he? Hey, you want to win friends and influence enemies? Then don’t call them snakes! His reference to them as “You brood of vipers” is connecting them to Satan, that “serpent of old” (Rev 12:9). He is basically calling them Satan’s offspring. But John the Baptist, like any true messenger of God, is not out to win any popularity contests. He sarcastically asks them, “Who warned you to flee the wrath to come?” In other words, “Why are you here? Who chased you out from the comfort of Jerusalem to this barren wilderness? He questions their true motives (perhaps it was curiosity, pressure from the people, or they felt threatened). But, whatever the reason, since you are here let me give you the same message I am giving everyone else – you need it too – REPENT!! “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” Change your lifestyle.

READ Matthew 3:9-10. It doesn’t matter what your heritage or your ancestry or your nationality is. It doesn’t matter who you are. You need to repent and get your heart and life right with God. I love Jesus’ response later in His ministry when the Pharisees pulled the “Abraham is our father” card on Him. Jesus’ response was simply, “If you are Abraham’s children, do the deeds of Abraham” (John 8:39). God declared Abraham as righteous because he believed God, because of his faith in God. And how do we know Abraham had faith in God? He obeyed God. What does John the Baptist proclaim to the people who came to hear him? “You need to get saved because time is running out. Judgment is near.” There is a sense of urgency in John’s preaching.

In John the Baptist’s preaching as with the message of the O.T. prophets, salvation and judgment are closely linked together. One’s response to the message of God will either salvation or judgment. One’s response to the Messiah-King, Jesus will determine whether they receive salvation (eternal life) or judgment, His wrath (an eternity in hell). Quote John 3:16.

READ Matthew 3:11-12. In these verses we see the analogy of the King separating the wheat from the chaff. In Matthew 25 the analogy is used of separating the sheep from the goats. There are three baptisms mentioned in verse 11. One is the John the Baptist baptism, which we have already discussed. It is different from the other two baptisms mentioned. In Acts 19:4 Paul said that “John’s baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, Jesus.” The other two baptisms are those performed the King Himself when He comes. If you receive the King, Jesus, as your Lord and your Savior then you receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5, 1 Cor 12:13). However, if you reject the King, Jesus and refuse to let Him rule in your heart then you can expect to receive a different baptism – the baptism of fire. How do I know that. Verse 10 ends with fire, obviously referring to a fire of God’s judgment. Verse 12 also ends with fire, again referring to the fire of divine judgment. Why would the fire of verse 11 be any different? Fire is often used synonymously with divine punishment. We see it here. We see it in Jesus’ teachings. In Mark 9:43, for example, Jesus refers to hell as “the unquenchable fire.” We see it in Genesis with Sodom and Gomorrah. We see it in Deuteronomy (4:24 and 32:22) and in Revelation (17:16, 18:8, 19:20, 20:14).

One cannot truly preach salvation without also preaching judgment. They are two sides to the same coin.

READ Matthew 3:13. How was Jesus the King received?