

<b>Topic</b>	Baptism
<b>Reference</b>	Matthew 3
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<b>Speaker</b>	David and Suzanne Adams

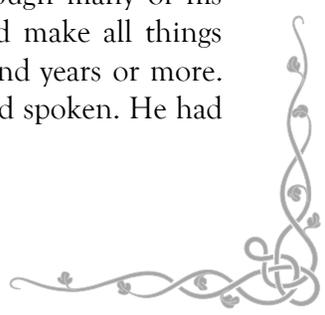
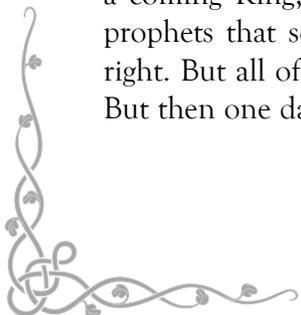
As 2020 has drawn to a close and we've begun a new year, many of us desire a better year in 2021. There is the hope that things might improve, especially with the promise of vaccines that are supposed to be coming. But yet in our current situation, many people are struggling. Almost 2000 years ago, the setting for our scripture passage today, many of the people in Judea were struggling. They faced enormous difficulties, yet they had hoped that their situation would get better.

Try to imagine what it might've been like as an average Hebrew living in Judea at that time. You would have known that you were part of God's chosen people. You probably would have heard that being a physical descendant of Abraham guarantee that you are right with God. So undoubtedly you would have felt some religious pride and you might've had a sense of ethnic and racial superiority, thinking you are better than all other peoples. Yet, when you looked around there didn't seemed to be much evidence of any advantages of being part of God's people. The entire country was under military occupation by Roman soldiers, gentiles, whose very presence was enough to bring defilement. Plus, there was the heavy burden of taxation placed on everyone. And you knew you were being cheated by dishonest tax collectors and that the money was being used to line the pockets of corrupt officials and to support the further oppression of your people.

Many people lived in poverty, and those who had means were for the most part filled with greed and selfishness. They seem to have little concern for the needs of the poor and the less fortunate. Why even some of the religious leaders, the Sadducees appeared to be primarily interested in money, as well as having a strong desire for political influence. The impression you might have had of the Sadducees was that they were concerned with religion, primarily as a way to bring prosperity. And as a means for personal power and advancement.

And then there were the Pharisees, they appeared to be very devout. They were extremely legalistic, and they followed every tiny detail of the law. For example, they would painstakingly count their seeds to make sure they gave exactly enough to equal one 10<sup>th</sup> of their possessions, and maybe they were very exact in their counting because they wanted to make sure they did not give too much. Right. It seemed that the Pharisees often majored on relatively minor things, such as counting the number of steps they took on the Sabbath. But surely that's not what was important to God. The Pharisees seemed eager to parade their piety before others, but maybe there was more show than substance.

If you had lived in Judea 2000 years ago, you would have undoubtedly heard from childhood stories about a coming King, a deliverer, someone who would save his people. God promised through many of his prophets that someone special would come and this person would execute justice and make all things right. But all of those prophetic words were hundreds of years old, some even a thousand years or more. But then one day you heard exciting news, after 400 years of silence God had announced spoken. He had



sent his people a new messenger, a prophet named John and John had a clear message from God that brought hope.

Unlike the current religious leaders, John was content with a low standard of living. He seemed to have no desire for material things or prestige. His only mission was to declare the word he had received from God. Wearing simple clothing of camel's hair and a leather belt he would have appeared much like the ancient prophet Elijah. Could this be the one of whom the prophet Malakai had spoken in chapter 3,

**Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare a way for me.**

And again, in chapter four,

**Behold, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.**

John was preaching that people should get ready for the coming of the King. He was even saying that the coming kingdom was very near. Now this would have been thrilling news because it would appear that John might be the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight as foretold by the prophet Isaiah in chapter 40.

If you had been a Jew 2000 years ago in Judea, you probably would have gone out into the Judean desert to the place alongside the Jordan River where John was preaching and baptizing to experience firsthand what was going on. Crowds of people thronged to hear the message John was preaching and to be baptized by him. And what was the message John was preaching? It was a very simple clear and straightforward message. **Repent for the kingdom of heaven is here.** To hear that the kingdom of God was near was exciting. To know that the long-awaited Messiah, the anointed King was coming and coming soon was good news. But strangely enough, there was a no call to raise an army to welcome the King and to fight with him to free the people from oppression, bringing long awaited deliverance to a needy people. And there was no mention of hiring a distinguished architect to design a palace, nor were there talks about plans for a massive building program. And yet a King was coming. Plans needed to be made. Things needed to be made ready, but the preparation needed was for lives to be transformed and renewed. The hearts of people must be made ready to receive the King. How? By repentance.

Now repent and repentance are words that are found often in the Bible. The Old Testament prophets called the people to repent, to turn back to God. And we see that repent is the first word out of the mouth of John the Baptist.

The first message Jesus gave in his earthly ministry was identical to the message of John the Baptist. He said **repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.** And in Mark chapter 6 verse 12, we read that the 12 disciples went out and proclaim that people should repent. After Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection he gave his disciples preset preaching instructions and he told them that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all peoples. At the end of the apostle Peter's first sermon, he told his hearers they needed to repent. He did not say, raise your hand nor bow your head and repeat this simple prayer. He said repent. And the Apostle Paul said that he preached to everyone, both Jew and Gentile, repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

When the word repent is used that much and more importantly, when it is a major part of the message of the prophets of Jesus and of the apostles, it is essential that we understand what the word 'repent' means and even more crucial that we experience it.

### **What does the word repentance mean?**

Does it just mean to say I'm sorry or just to apologize? And I've heard people from some confessions that were talking about doing penance as if our good deeds could somehow make up for our mistakes. In the New Testament, our word repentance as a translation of the Greek word, metanoia, a word, which is a made up of a combination of two words, which are translated change and mind or thinking. So a beginning understanding of the meaning of repentance includes it is a change of mind or a change in the way we think, but John and also Jesus spoke mainly to Hebrew audiences. So their hearers would have understood the meaning of the word repentance in light of the Hebrew verb for repentance that is used in scripture. And that word means to turn around to new actions.

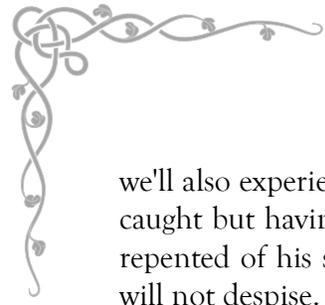
The New Testament writings would be influenced by that Hebrew verb. So what is meant is not merely an intellectual change of mind, rather what is meant is a radical transformation of the entire person, the mind, the heart, the entire life. This will inevitably result in fruit that is in keeping with repentance as John said.

So it sounds like repentance is a change that happens on the inside that results in changes on the outside. Yes. It begins as implied by the Greek meaning of the word with the change of mind, with a change in our thinking, what we know, think, believe about God changes. This happens when we hear a clear presentation of the gospel message, and when we are exposed to the teachings of scripture, then God's spirit will convince us of the truth of the gospel, our understanding of who God is and his claims on our life will change to conform to how he has revealed himself through his word.

When we realize who Jesus is and what he has done and what he has done for us, our thinking about everything changes, our understanding of who we are changes, created and loved by God yet separated from him because of our sin. And our understanding of sin changes as we realize sin is not only outward acts of disobedience, but can include thoughts and attitudes, matters of the mind and of the heart.

So if you truly allow God to change your thinking, that would surely lead to a change of the heart. We will experience changes in our values, our priorities and our goals as we begin to want what God wants and as we let him transform our will into his will. Our reason for living changes, possessions and position are no longer our highest priorities. Comfort and insecurity are no longer our utmost concern. And there will be within us a growing desire to love God, to spend time with him in prayer and in his word, there will also be a growing concern for other people when God changes our thinking. We come to understand how much God loves all people, all the people that he created and this changes our heart.

As we see people through God's eyes, we feel his heart of love for them. For instance, we become aware that a friend is experiencing loneliness and depression because of the isolation caused by the MCO. And we seek to find a way to encourage them, or we become burdened for a neighbor who is far away from God, and we have a burning desire to share the gospel with them. When there is a change in our heart,



we'll also experience contrition, not just feeling a tinge of regret and definitely not just being sorry you got caught but having a broken heart over our sin and disobedience. As the Psalmist said in Psalm 51, as he repented of his sin. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart. Oh God, you will not despise.

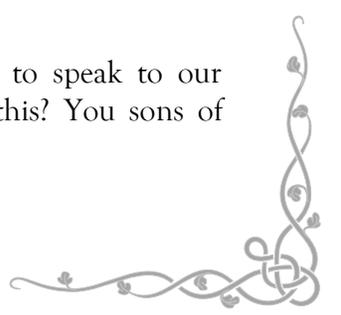
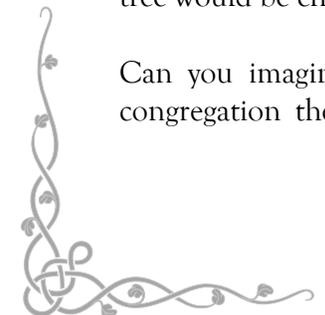
The change of heart is a work of God and his grace, God speaks to us through his word and then his Holy spirit brings conviction of sin and enables us to respond to God in repentance. And when we allow God to change our thinking and also to change our heart, the result is a change in the direction of our lives. It's like making a U-turn. Instead of living a self-centered life, we want to live a life that is God centered. Instead of focusing mainly on our own desires, we seek to follow God's will and obey him. Then because God has changed us on the inside and given us a new direction in life, there will be changes in how we live, what we do or what we don't do, what we say or what we don't say. In all of these areas we will begin to see some changes. But it's important to understand that repentance begins on the inside with the change in our thinking and the change in our heart. Then we will be able to bring forth fruit of repentance as the scripture says. It is doubtful true repentance has taken place if there is no outward evidence.

In our texts this morning, John called the people to true repentance and multitudes heard him gladly. They repented, they came confessing their sin and they were baptized. Now baptism was something that most Jews had never personally experienced. Although baptism was practiced, it was reserved for non-Jews, for gentiles, for those coming from other religions, when gentiles were ready to renounce their former faith and their idolatries they were baptized to be accepted into Judaism. This was something new for a Jew to be baptized. Evidently, the multitudes that John baptized realized their hearts were not right with God. They had come to understand that their religious, cultural and family backgrounds couldn't make them right before God. They needed a change of heart. They needed forgiveness of sin. They needed something they could not accomplish through their own works. They needed God and his grace.

So through the outward visible symbol of baptism, they were testifying of an inward change that they had experienced. When we get to verse 7 in our text, we see a dramatic encounter between John and some religious leaders. Many of the Pharisees and Sadducees were coming to where John was baptizing. Now we don't know their motives, may be they just wanted to inspect what was happening. Maybe they wanted to see if it met with their approval or maybe they want it to be baptized possibly to put on an outward show of piety to show how ready they were for the coming of the Messiah. But John knew they were filled with pride and self-righteousness. He knew they had truly not repented. So, he cried out to them, you brood of vipers who warned you to flee from the wrath to come. Bear fruit in your life to prove you have truly repented.

Then John told them just because you are descended from Abraham does not make you right with God, why God could raise up children of Abraham from these stones. And John told the religious leaders that they face severe judgment. They and what they stood for was like a tree which bore no fruit and such a tree would be chopped down, cut off from the root, thrown into the fire and burned up.

Can you imagine how people in our church might respond? If the preachers were to speak to our congregation the way John spoke to those Pharisees and Sadducees, you mean like this? You sons of



snakes, why did you bother to crawl in front of your computer today to tune into worship? Did you just want to make yourself feel better about how good and faithful you are? Or what if they said, I don't really care about what you've done for the church or how much money you've given. I want to know what you're doing with your life. Where are you headed? And don't give me some polite banal answer or what have they said, this is not pretend time. This is serious. And there are consequences to the way we live and the choices you make. So, if you are here to change your ways and to open yourself up to God, that's great, but prove it by the way you live. And if not go on, slither back to where you came from.

I think in some churches, such as sermon would result in the preacher never being invited back. The pastor's wife would probably be afraid her husband would soon be unemployed and there would probably be lots of conversations and WhatsApp texts discussing, are we really going to allow that kind of preaching in our church and quite possibly some tithes and offerings would be withheld. That kind of preaching is not what we expect when we come to worship. We don't like it when we think we are being criticized or judged. We do not want to be made to feel uncomfortable. Yeah. I don't like that kind of preaching. I don't like to be yelled at. I don't like it either.

It might be that we feel uncomfortable with such preaching because we really don't want to change. We're content with life as it is, maybe we're even indifferent. We've become comfortable and we don't like anyone messing with our life, our plans, our systems. So we show up for worship, hoping and expecting to receive affirmation, to be told God loves us. We want to be told that we're just fine the way we are and that we shouldn't change one thing. Yes, but that kind of message only keeps us stuck. We know the wounds that still hurt. We know the relationships that are broken. We see hunger and poverty and injustice all around and we would rather offer excuses than offer our time and money and we know how fear can control our lives.

So what we really need is someone who will speak the truth to us in love, one who will be honest with us about our life and who will challenge us. We need truth that says life doesn't have to stay like this. Truth that gives hope and a way forward, and we need to be reminded that we can change by God's grace. To multitudes of people in John's day this was extremely good news, knowing that the kingdom of heaven was near that the promised Messiah was coming very soon, they gladly responded to the message from God with repentance, but the Pharisees and Sadducees did not want to change. In their ethnic and religious pride, the Pharisees thought they needed no repentance after all why do I need to repent if I've done nothing wrong.

And the Sadducees wanted to continue in their self-centered lifestyle, hanging on to all the wealth and the power they could. No desire for real change, if that could mean risking the loss of something you value more. Are we sometimes like this?

After John warned the religious leaders, they faced the coming wrath of judgment because they had not repented he went on to explain more about the coming Messiah, the King, who would reign over the kingdom of heaven. He said in verse 11,

**I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not even worthy to carry. He will baptize you with Holy Spirit and fire.**

John was of course talking about Jesus. He said, Jesus was much greater than he. The lowliest of slaves had the job to carry someone sandals. So, John was saying he was not worthy to even do this lowly job, yet Jesus later said that John was the greatest man who had ever lived. So, if Jesus is that much greater than the greatest man who ever lived he must indeed be Lord, the one for whom the way was being prepared. In the Old Testament, the word Lord refers to God Almighty. In the New Testament we see Jesus identified as Lord.

Matthew gives us a glimpse in chapter 3 of the saving work that Jesus will do. Jesus is the one who will baptize his followers with Holy Spirit and fire and this fulfills the prophecy in Ezekiel chapter 36, where God promised I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, a new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you and I will remove from your body, the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you and make you follow my statutes.

Jesus will baptize with Holy Spirit and fire, a refiner's fire, which purifies. Jesus is indeed the savior. He will purify us, give us a new heart and fill us with his spirit. And the King who was coming, Jesus is judge. John said his winnowing fork is in his hand and he will clear his threshing floor, gather all of his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. The symbolism here is that of harvest time. The good grain will be gathered into the barn but the worthless chaff will be burned up. The coming of God's kingdom demands repentance. Otherwise, there will be judgment.

Now judgment is good news for those who have repented and placed their faith in Jesus. Righteousness, goodness, justice will prevail. Christ's followers will be with him forever, but for those who don't repent and place their faith in Jesus and for those who want merely an outward show of religion, judgment will be terrible. Everything will be lost and will be cast into the fire and burned up. Here fire being a symbol for everlasting, torment and suffering.

While John proclaimed the kingdom of heaven with the resulting need to repent, Jesus came to him and asked to be baptized, but John was hesitant. He knew Jesus had never sinned. Jesus was after all the Holy one of God. So, he had needed no repentance, and John also recognized his own need for a savior and he told Jesus, I need to be baptized by you. But Jesus told John permit this now it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness. So John baptized Jesus.

### **Why did Jesus want to be baptized by John?**

There are many possible answers. First of all, Jesus gave validity to the message. John was preaching. He confirmed that everything John had said about him and the need for repentance was true. At his baptism Jesus publicly identified with the people he had come to save. Later, all believers were commanded to publicly identify with Jesus through baptism. Jesus set the example for his followers. He would later give the command that all those who came to faith in him should be baptized in the name of the father, the son and the Holy spirit.

And this outward act of obedience was to be a public testimony of an inward change that the believer had experienced. And Jesus' baptism was the inauguration of his public ministry. From this moment on Jesus would teach and preach and perform mighty miracles. Then three years later, he would experience what

he figuratively he had referred to as baptism, his death on the cross to pay the penalty for the sins of the world, but three days later, he would rise from the dead.

So when we are baptized, we identify with the death and the resurrection of Jesus. And we acknowledge that we too have died to sin and been raised to a new quality of life. Baptism can be seen as the beginning of a new believers' life of service and ministry.

Jesus was baptized because that was God's will for him. And then God, the father showed his public affirmation of Jesus. As Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and the spirit of God descended like a dove to rest on Jesus. And the voice of God could be heard saying, this is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.

Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah, the anointed King, the savior and the one who will judge the world. He is the son of God. Here we see the entire Godhead, the Trinity.

- God the father speaks from heaven.
- God, the son begins his earthly ministry, and
- God the Holy spirit anoints and fills.

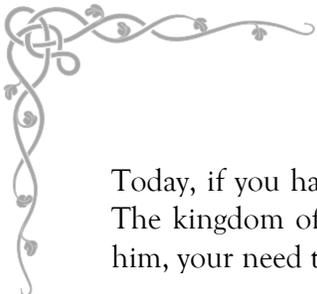
So today, how will you respond to the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come. The answer given by John and later by Jesus and his disciples is repent. Come to God in repentance and faith, not grudgingly, not just to escape judgment, although that can be a sobering motivation, but come trusting God's love for you.

#### **And how do we respond to the good news that Jesus is the anointed King?**

I think the words of a Carol sung by many of us weeks ago gives a great answer. Joy to the world, the Lord has come, let earth receive her King. In joy we receive Jesus as King and we allow him to rule over all aspects of our lives in truth and grace.

Repentance brings joy when we are ready to accept God's incredible love given to us in his beloved son. Now, some might think I can't repent, I'm not strong enough, I cannot change. No, of course not. Of course you cannot repent. None of us are strong enough to repent if we're dependent on our own strength, but the scripture tells us that God's spirit will enable you. As a matter of fact, the scripture says it is God who gives repentance. God's great power can transform you into Christ image, both inwardly and outwardly.

Repentance is a vital part in our salvation experience. It's part of our initial response to the Lord Jesus Christ. In order to turn in faith to Jesus but we must at the same time, turn from sin, turn from self and other gods. Now that does not mean we will never sin again. We will continue to struggle, nobody can live without sin. As a matter of fact, 1 John chapter one tells us that if we say we have no sin, we are just deceiving ourselves. As a matter of fact, it says we are lying. So after coming to faith in Christ, we continue to walk in faith, with repentance being an ongoing daily part of our walk with God.



Today, if you have never accepted Jesus as your Lord and savior, I would encourage you to do that now. The kingdom of heaven is near, the savior has come. Is your heart prepared to receive him? Confess to him, your need to be forgiven and renewed and ask him to take control of your life.

If you've already received Jesus and have followed his example then you need to follow his example by obeying him in the act of baptism. If not, that's a step of faith you want to take when possible. All of us know people who are outside of the kingdom of God, yet some of the people we know who are outside of God's kingdom undoubtedly desire to know God. Some of them would want to be part of a community where God's love can touch them and the others around them. So let's do what we can to help them know how they can enter into the kingdom of heaven.