

Matthew 3:1-17 – Prepare for Jesus: Turn or Burn

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Main point- Turn from your sin to the Lord, before the fire of judgement comes.

It was early in the morning in Arizona, Jan 1st this year, when Carolyn noticed smoke coming from her neighbour's house, where Nicole, her husband and 4 kids were sleeping.

Carolyn went next door and saw flames coming out of the garage.

She ran to the front door, pounding on it.

No body answered and she started ringing the bell over and over and yelling out.

And thankfully Nicole and the family woke up & made it out safely.

Within minutes the roof collapsed.-----

Nicole's family were saved, when Carolyn warned them of the danger and fire.----

And that's what God does in his word for us today – warn us of danger and fire.

(SLIDE)----- But even this title might turn some of you off.

Turn or Burn.

It can seem so blunt, so arrogant; so unloving.-----

Turn to God or suffer judgement!-----

I hear my friend saying, "How dare you say that my life isn't good enough;

How dare you say that you know the truth and I need to listen to you;-----

How dare you say, Jesus is the only way to God,

and if I don't turn to him I'll be punished for my sin".-----

When we say this, when I say this, some may say we're trying to bully people into religion, or coerce people into heaven.

Maybe you've heard that?-----

Maybe you're sitting here, thinking that?-----

But we must say it. I must say it.

God is love, but He is equally holy and just.-----

A preacher's duty is to declare the day of wrath, and the doom of the wicked.---

I must be faithful to God, faithful to you.

And love you by telling you of the wrath of God that is coming, and of the one who can save you from it.-----

Because if that day comes and I didn't tell you, or we didn't tell our friends, then they could well accuse us of being unloving.-----

But please come with me, as we look not at my opinions, but what God says here.----

Let's look at how John the Baptist prepares people for Jesus.-----

Jesus is so important, that after a 400yr gap between the Old and New Testaments, after 400 years of silence from God, Jesus has someone announce his arrival.

When you rock-up-at-church you don't normally have someone announce your arrival.

Maybe on your wedding day, as everyone stands.

But **John the Baptist**, the last OT prophet, in about AD 27, announces the arrival of God's Son, the Messiah; the King n' Saviour Jesus.-----

And everything about John is startling. He comes out of no-where.

His clothing, his food, his message, his baptizing of Jews, is all startling & unexpected.

If you know your OT prophets, John may remind you of someone?-----

Elijah. Like Elijah in 2 Kings 1, John wore a garment of hair and a leather belt.

And as we read in Malachi 4, the very last verses of the OT promise that a future Elijah figure would come, who would prepare the way for the Lord's coming.

In **Mal 4:5** God says, **(SLIDE)** "I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶ And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction-----

John the Baptist fulfills this; & prepares people for the Lord primarily by calling people to **Repent of Sin; our first point.(SLIDE)-----**

In quoting **Isa 40 in v3** he's saying, I'm preaching in the wilderness to prepare people for the coming of GOD.-----

And he does this, by **preaching repentance.**

v2, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."-----

The kingdom of heaven means the 'kingdom of God'.

Remember Matthew writes especially for Jews, and Jews often avoided using God's name, out of reverence.-----

So read Kingdom of heaven and think, God's Kingly rule.-----

And God's rule is near because Jesus Christ, God's appointed King, is near; n' about to arrive publicly.-----

John's prepared people for Christ, by calling them to confess their sin and repent.----

What does it mean to repent?-----

If I realised I was eating too much chocolate and my cholesterol was up; if I repent, I change my mind and my direction, and stop-eating chocolate.---

(Kids remember the kids talk...)

If I am driving down the street and I realised I'm going the wrong way, I would do a U-turn, I would repent and head back the other way.-----

To repent is to change your mind, your direction, your life's direction.

In the Bible, to repent means to repent of sin, to turn away from rebelling against God and ruling your own life.

God wants us to turn back to him.

In Malachi 3.7 God says,(**SLIDE**) 'You have turned away from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you'.-----

We do that when you trust in the Lord and let him take charge of your life, take the steering wheel of your heart; let King Jesus call the shots.-----

Have you done that?-----

Confessed your sins, like the people in **v6**, all the things you did wrong and failed to do right?

Confessed how you've wanted to rule your own life, and decided to stop, turn back to Jesus, and asked him to be your King?—

Have you done that?-----

Why not do that today?-----

Why do we have a shower or a bath?-----

It's to wash the dirt and stink off, and be clean, isn't it?-----

Well, back in Jesus' day, if a Gentile wanted to convert to Judaism, they'd have to be washed, be baptized, symbolizing the washing of their sins.-----

Repentance is signified, in baptism.-----

John was called, the Baptist, because he baptized so many.

Crowds came from Jerusalem, and all around, and **v6**, 'were baptized by him in the river Jordan.'

v11, they were baptized 'for repentance', which likely means as a sign of their repentance.---

I don't know if the Jordan (**SLIDE**) was clean or dirty then, but remember it was symbolism.

Christian Baptism signifies the washing away of our sins, the receiving and cleansing of the Spirit, the commitment to live God's way, and our initiation into relationship with God, which Christ enabled through the cross.-----

It's a very rich symbol.-----

Baptism is like a flashing neon sign that says, God by grace washes us clean, when we repent and believe.-----

We'll come back to baptism in our next point.-----

So crowds of people are coming to John, and in **v7**, the Jewish leaders come too.

The Pharisees, who saw themselves as the separated ones, better n' more holy than everyone else; and the Sadducees, of the high-priestly party, come.

And look at what John calls them... 'You brood of vipers';--- you snakes.

That's a pretty sharp, don't you think?-----

Interestingly in Luke's account of this, John says this to the crowds.-----

John's saying, you can't just think you're safe cos you're a physical descendant of Abraham.

You must 'bear fruit in keeping with repentance', **v8**.

In other words, genuine, sincere repentance, your turning from sin to God, must **show itself in action**, in our life and behaviour, and good works.

The evidence of repentance will be a changed life.-----

As Paul says, in **Acts 26**, 'I preached that [people] should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance'.

Or showing their repentance by their deeds.

When we talk about fruit, we are talking about hearts that have been changed, by the grace of God, and what that looks like in real life.-----

You and I can't say we've repented, say we're Christian, then live how we want.

If we've turned to God it will show itself in how we live.

In love for God and love for others.-----

And(**SLIDE**) **what will motivate this real repentance?---**

John says, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"-----

And he gives us two pictures in **v10** to help us see that we need to repent now.

One of chopping, one of burning: The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

The message is repent **or be judged**.-----

John's message was not flattering but frightening, not soothing but soul-searching.

He preached immanent doom, a catastrophe that could only be avoided by a radical U-turn of heart and mind.-----(**SLIDE**)

It was **Charles Spurgeon** who is famous for the phrase, "**Turn Or Burn**".

In a sermon on Psalm 7 in 1856, he called people to: 'Turn or burn'.-----

People today, even we, need to hear the same message.-----

This is terrible, and if it were about my feelings I'd not say it.

But as Spurgeon says, 'We assert, that there is a **NECESSITY** that God should whet [sharpen] his sword and punish men, if they will not turn. Earnest Baxter used to say, "Sinner! turn or burn; it is your only alternative: **TURN OR BURN!**"---- And it is so.'---

God must punish sin. God is just so he cannot leave sin unpunished.-----

People must turn, or else they will burn.-----

I say this out of love for you.

There comes a time when we're to say this to others, even with tears, out of love for them.---

To imagine that there shall be no punishment for sin, and that people can be saved without repentance, is to fly in the face of all the Scriptures.

In **Spurgeon's words**,(**SLIDE**) 'Did God once blast Eden, and drive our parents out of that happy garden...? Did he drown a world with water, and inundate creation with the floods?----

--- Will he not punish sin?-----

Let the burning hail which fell on Sodom tell you that God is just.'-----

John the Baptist prepares people for the King Jesus, by calling them to repent of their sin, before the fire of judgement comes.-----

Our Second main point(SLIDE) - John also prepares people by pointing them to Jesus, calling them to Turn to Jesus.

Matthew's Gospel has already told us that Jesus is the promised descendant of Abraham, and son of David, the Christ, God's promised King.

He is Immanuel, God with us.

He's named Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.

And the non-Jewish wise men came to worship him.-----

Now John the Baptist wants people to look to him, saying in **v11**, the one coming after me is mightier than I.

And I'm not worthy to carry his sandals.-----

In other words, I'm not even worthy to be his slave & carry his shoes.

That's how great Jesus is!-----

Just briefly what else are we told about Jesus? Who is he?-----

In **v17**, God's voice declares him to be **the Son of God**.

The Son is loved by his Father, and he truly, fully always pleases his Father.

Unlike us.-----

Yet there's more. What the Gospels tell us about Jesus is so rich, so deep.-----

He also has the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, **v16**.

So, Jesus, the second person of the trinity, also has the presence of the 3rd person of the trinity.-----

And yet, while Jesus is God, he is also truly and **fully human**.

And as a human being, Jesus comes to be **baptized** in the Jordan.

But the question John can't get his head around is WHY?-----

Jesus had no sin to confess, nothing to repent of, so why be baptized?---

He says, **v15** it's to '**fulfill all righteousness**'.-----

Here Jesus is identifying with us sinners, he's walking in our shoes.

He must be identified with his people in the removal of their sins.-----

As **Isa 53.12** says, 'he was numbered with the transgressors'.-----

Also, his water baptism anticipates another future baptism.

Jesus will describe his suffering n' death as a baptism he must undergo, **Luke 12.50**.

So his baptism here looks forward to the waves of God's judgement that will wash over him on the cross.-----

Jesus bears our sins unto death, enabling us to be forgiven.-----

Christians, isn't that what we believe?-----

But also, Jesus not only has the Spirit, **v11 he gives the Spirit**.-----

While John baptizes & washes people with water, Jesus will baptize, so wash and bring people the Spirit.-----

As Acts 2 tells us, it was the risen and ascended Jesus who poured out the HS at Pentecost, with tongues of fire.

It was Jesus who gave the HS to his people. And he still does.

So do you have the Spirit?-----

If you don't, just turn to Jesus and trust in him.-----

Water baptism doesn't save anyone, not adults or infants.-----

But if you're a believer, if you have repented and turned to trust in Christ, are you baptized?--

If not, why not?-----

Neglecting baptism is to disobey the Lord, and a failure to follow the example of Christ himself.-----

Baptism is an important sign and confirmation of the way God saves us by his grace.---

However, Don't look to your water baptism for comfort.

Don't even look to your family for comfort.

If the Jews in v9, couldn't take comfort in the fact they were Abraham's descendants, please don't think having Christian parents, will save you. That wont.-----

Don't look to your family for confidence. Look only to Christ.-----

John came to prepare people for Jesus and point people to him.

And John not only preached that people needed to repent or face judgement;---

He even makes clear that that **Jesus** is the one who will **bring the judgement**.

V12 Jesus will clear the threshing floor.

He will gather the wheat, and burn the chaff with an unquenchable fire.-----

This is saying, those who have not repented and born fruit, Jesus will cast into the fire, the fire that never stops.-----

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus repeatedly speaks of those who don't bear fruit being thrown into the fire, experiencing eternal fire, the fire of hell (Mt 7.19; 18.8-9).-----

How terrible, and how terrifying.-----

In love John is warning people, Turn or burn.

And in love God warns us all here, Turn, or Burn.

The Westminster Confession puts it like this, it's knowing and sensing the danger, and the filthiness of our sin, that moves us to turn to God for mercy that's found in Christ.---

You might be so totally living for yourself and sin, that you think, I have no hope I will ever turn from it by myself. But listen!-----

He who died on the cross, is exalted on high "that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins".----- (Acts 5.31)

Do you today feel that you are a sinner?

If so, ask Christ to change your heart, ask Christ to give you repentance, for he can work repentance in your heart, by his Spirit.-----

Is your heart hard like iron?-----

He can put it into the furnace of his love, and make it melt.-----

Is your heart cold to the work of God?-----

His grace is able to dissolve it like the ice is melted by the sun.-----

Go home today and bow your knees before God, remember and confess your sins: tell him you cannot repent as you want to; tell him your heart is hard; tell him it's as cold as ice.

You can do that if God has made you feel your need of a Saviour.-----

Then if you've been convicted of your sins, and your heart desires to seek after repentance, then sit down for an hour and read the end of Matthew's Gospel.-----

And as you see the King Jesus who loved and died. As you see that glorious Man, with blood dripping from his hands and his feet...; and if that does not make you repent, by God's Spirit, then I know of nothing that can.-----

This repentance John calls people to happens once off, when we turn from our rebellion, to God in faith, when we get converted and are born again.-----

This repentance is not just the cutting the top off a weed but the removal at the root.

Through repentance we get a new heart.-----

It's changing a sewer pipe that spews forth filth, for a fountain of clean water.-----

So if you Have repented, and come under the rule of King Jesus, then live for him now.-----

You see, for all of us, who have repented and believed, there is that ongoing, continual repentance required of us.

There is a general repentance, which is followed throughout life, with a duty to repent of particular sins.-----

We who've been saved by Jesus and know he's our Lord and King, we must still repent of our specific sins.-----

We must give them up and turn away from them.-----

What is God convicting you of in your conscience at the moment, that needs to change?-----

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What sin does he want you to hate?-----

What does he want you to change to please him?

Maybe it's a fear of man, a fear of people, or a lack of love, that stops us warning others of the judgment to come.

Just like Carolyn warned her neighbour of the fire in her house, we love people when we warn them of the danger and fire of God's judgement.-----

Pray you will love others in words and actions.

Pray you will hate your sin and turn from it.

Pray your life in 2021 will be one of ongoing repentance.-----

A man went to church one day 'bowed down with guilt; feeling his sinfulness. The minister walked up the pulpit stairs, opened his Bible, and read, **Isa 45.22,(SLIDE)**

"Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other".---
 A 15 year boy later writes, the preacher fixed his eyes on me, and before he began to
 preach to others, he said,

"Young man! look! look! look!

You are one of the ends of the earth; you feel you are; you know your need of a Saviour.-----
 Charles Spurgeon said, 'By his grace I looked upon Jesus, and though desponding,
 downcast, and ready to despair, and feeling that I could rather die than live as I had lived, at
 that very moment it seemed as if heaven had had its birth within my conscience. I went
 home, no more cast down.-----

Those about me, noticing the change, asked me why I was so glad, and I told them that I
 had believed in Jesus".-----

Could that be you today?-----

John prepared people for Jesus by calling them to turn from their sin.

We can be prepared for and safe from the fires of judgement if we turn from our sin and trust
 in Jesus.

Then the Father can say to us, just as he once said to Jesus, "You are my beloved son, my
 beloved daughter, with you I am well pleased."

So turn to Jesus!.-----

Let's pray.