

PREPARE FOR A NEW LIFE

We would be amazed to know the detail that goes into preparation for a visit by royalty or a head of state. If the Queen of England visits our country, her representatives arrive many days in advance to make sure everything is worked out and there will be no surprises. If the President visits another city or state, the Secret Service agents arrive before he does and work with the local officials to ensure his safety. The press core gets ready to cover the event and others arrange for his accommodations. Such preparation is not limited to governmental officials. Entertainment stars have their own advance people making arrangements for them when they visit a place. If such preparation were not made, then the purpose of the visit might not be accomplished.

In the ancient world mass communication did not exist as it does today. It was even more important for visiting dignitaries to have someone precede them to make people aware of what was about to happen. Governors sent people ahead of them, kings and emperors did the same. When God the Son began His mission on earth there was an announcer who preceded Him.

MATTHEW 3:1-4 John made his announcement right on schedule. Nearly 500 years before, the prophet Daniel pinpointed the start of the ministry of Jesus to the very year. In Daniel 9:24-27 we learn that the probation period for the Jews would be 490 years from the decree to rebuild Jerusalem. During the last seven years of this probation period the Messiah would confirm His covenant with His people. This prophecy was fulfilled and Jesus began His earthly ministry 483 years after the decree was given. Some students of prophecy were anticipating the appearance of the Messiah. Though some Jews looked for the coming of the Messiah, they were not ready for Him when He did come. In fact, they were not ready even though God sent someone to announce that He was coming.

John the Baptist came preaching a message about repentance and the kingdom of heaven. He spoke about preparing the way of the Lord. Matthew tells us that John was the one spoken of by Isaiah the prophet as the voice of one crying in the wilderness. The fuller message of Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah 40:3-5 reveals when the Lord comes every valley shall be raised up and every mountain brought low. Also, the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all mankind would be able to behold it.

John proclaimed his message out in the desert or wilderness area. This venue may have been to symbolized the dryness and barrenness of the spiritual condition of the nation of Israel.

In retrospect we can see that the ministry of Jesus was pictured in this prophecy of Isaiah. In this word picture, valleys could depict the humble being lifted up and the mountains could depict the proud being rejected. Some people saw themselves as so bad they could not believe God would care about them. Other saw themselves as so high and mighty that they did not need anyone's help. Jesus helped those who came to Him in their valley of trouble and sickness. He also did not hesitate to cut down those who saw themselves as high and mighty. Concerning the glory of God being revealed, we can find no clearer picture of God and His glory apart from Jesus.

Jesus came into a world that put much stock in outward appearance. Agents of governors and kings would be expected to reflect the dignity of the ruler they represented in the way they dressed and the way they behaved themselves. Yet John the Baptist came as an eccentric non-conformist, dressed in camel hair and eating locust and wild honey.

MATTHEW 3:5-6 To many, John was a curiosity. Word spread through out the region about this unusual person out in the desert. John's message was effective because people listened and then heeded his call to repent.

John called for people to repent because the Kingdom of Heaven was near. Repentance is preparation to receive salvation. We should not put up barrier in the way for the coming of the King into our lives. Examples of such roadblocks are unforgiveness of those who have wronged us and known sins we refuse to give up. John called for confession of sins. So often, we neglect to admit the sins or faults in our lives. This failure is really denying the problem of sin and the problems that result from sin and is an indication that repentance has not happened.

Many were convicted by John's message. That is the outcome of an anointed person preaching an anointed message. They demonstrated this repentance by being baptized by John in the Jordan River. Baptism was typically used by the Jews as a ceremonial purification rite when Gentiles converted to Judaism. John called for all who repented (Jews and Gentiles) to be baptized as a sign of their renewed commitment to God.

The difference in John's baptism and Christian baptism is this. John's baptism represents a washing away of the sins in a person's life. Christian baptism symbolizes the death of the old life and resurrection to a new life in Christ. John's dealt with the question of sins, but Jesus came to deal with the question of sin.

MATTHEW 3:7-12 Not every one who came out to John was genuine in their search for truth. Besides the common people, the religious leaders (the Pharisees and Sadducees) from Jerusalem came to listen to John. I don't think they came to "hear" him. They were listening for some evidence that could be used to discredit John's ministry. John saw them in the crowd. How could he miss them? They were in their long robes and dressed so much better than the rest of the people. John had very little use for those who were religious for the sake of being religious. He called them a bunch of snakes. I believe John choose his words carefully. Satan had disguised himself as a serpent when he tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden. In the Revelation, John the Apostle referred to the devil as a great serpent. John saw people who were just "religious" as being tools of the devil.

It was unlikely these leaders came to participate in John's baptism. Nevertheless, John was quick to put them on notice that true repentance should show some evidence of change.

In our churches today, we are not likely to question the sincerity of people who come to "join the church" and want to see some "fruit" of their Christian life. Therefore, each of us should be questioning ourselves to see if our Christian walk is producing the "fruit" of faithfulness. There should be an evident difference in the life of a Christian and a non-Christian.

The reference to the wrath to come was likely related to the coming of the end of the period of probation for the Jews. God had granted them 490 years to finish transgressions, to bring in righteousness, and to anoint the Messiah. John knew they had failed to do the first part and he was sure they would reject the coming Messiah. He knew they were thinking that it was enough to be a true descendant of Abraham (through the lineage of Isaac and Jacob). They knew about God's promise to Abraham and they thought they had it made with God simply because they could trace their physical lineage back to him. What they failed to understand was that God is Spirit and the promises were given to spiritual Israel, to those who have the faith of Abraham.

Today, we can find ourselves with similar "misplaced faith." We may be counting on having our name on the role of a church and we believe that Jesus is the Son of God. However, if there has been no real change in our lives, then we are being deluded just the Jews were by believing they were right with God because they were physical descendants of Abraham.

Other may believe they are Christian simply because they are Americans. Others believe everything between themselves and God is just as it should be because their parents were "fine

Christian folks.” Still others believe that because they made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ, then they can live anyway they choose and that it is OK. John said, “Think again, my friend!”

John used a picture of a tree being cut down. Paul painted a picture in Romans 11 about branches being broken off (Jews) and others being grafted in (Gentiles). John may be referring to the preparation for grafting in the Gentiles to the root stock of Abraham. The Jews were entrusted with God's Plan of Salvation and were to use it to help all mankind come to God. They failed to do that (did not bear fruit) and that responsibility would be shifted to others. Based on the historical evidence, we know this trust was transferred to the Church.

The religious leaders questioned John about who he was and why he was baptizing. They wanted to know if he were the Messiah, or Elijah, or the prophet spoken of by Moses. John denied being any of those but pointed them to Someone Who was soon coming. Instead of baptizing with water the One to come would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

The separation of the wheat from the chaff could have a dual application: the first would be to the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers and the second to the separation of the saved from the unsaved.

Consider that chaff is a natural part of the wheat, but it must be removed before it can be used. In the same way our lives that are presented to God have to have the chaff removed so that we may be of use to God. This is what is involved in sanctification. It is the work of the Holy Spirit. The Greek word for wind (such as might be produced by the fan) is the same as that used for spirit.

John also saw the later work of Jesus in which a great purging will happen to sort out the true believers. This is likely a reference to the tribulation that is to come. The burning up of the residue is the outcome of the judgement at the end time.

MATTHEW 3:13-15 John went about his ministry and calling to sound out a warning for people to repent so they would be ready for the coming of the Messiah. One day Jesus left his carpenter shop in Nazareth and walked south down toward the desert where John was preaching and baptizing. It was time to start what He came to do. The God of Creation in human flesh was about to confirm His covenant with mankind. In the process, He also confirmed the ministry of John the Baptist. John recognized Jesus as the Messiah because John was filled with the Spirit of God. He realized that he needed the baptism that Jesus was going to bring to all His followers -- the baptism in the Holy Spirit.

John's baptism demonstrated repentance or "turning away" from our way of doing life and following God's way. It is the proper thing to do. It is the preparatory step in being able to receive the baptism that Jesus brings.