

The Kingdom of Heaven is Near

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[0 : 00] Okay, Matthew chapter 3, beginning at verse 1, we'll read the whole chapter. In those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea.

! Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.

Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Bear fruit in keeping the repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father. For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.

[1 : 17] Even now, the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruits, cut down and thrown into the fire.

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

His winnowing fork 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 unquenchable fire.

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan, to John, to be baptised by him. John would have prevented him, saying, I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?

But Jesus answered him, Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness.

[2 : 25] Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptised, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and coming to rest on him.

And behold, a voice from heaven said, This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Okay, have a go on to the person next to you about stuff that you see in the passage there that stands out to you, or you're sort of a bit of a question unclear about, and then we'll press in in a minute or two.

Okay. Let's pray. Let's pray together. Our fathers, if we sit under your word this morning, help us to hear you clearly, and respond appropriately. We ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, regime change is usually perilous. Moving from one kingdom to a... It is full of conflict is a difficult thing.

[3 : 45] We don't experience it much in Australia. We have elections, and by and large, a new covenant comes in, and the old one goes out, and life continues to roll on. Nothing much changes, really.

Maybe a few more laws are brought in for us to obey, but by and large, we don't particularly feel affected. But that's not the case in many parts of the world.

When a president or a political system is in place, it often takes bloodshed to actually bring about change, to revolution to come.

The old order wants to stay. We're not moving anywhere. And the new ruler needs to remove the old, often by force.

But then, the new order, well, it may even be worse than the last. We're seeing that kind of stuff happening around the place at the moment, played out constantly on the news broadcasts that we see constantly, hourly.

[4 : 55] Most people, though, we want our part of the world to be a nice place to live, don't we? We want it to be a place of good order, a place where there is peace, a place where injustice is dealt with, a place where we're safe, and a place where we live long and prosper.

Now, we've been trying various models of society over the years, kingdoms, if you like. For a long time now, there's been democracies, there's republics, there's Marxist ideologies, there's communist ideologies, there's theocratic ideologies to try and bring in utopia, a place where everything's good.

We want utopia. You want utopia. But there's only one problem. And it's you. That's the problem. You mess up my world. And just quietly, I mess up yours too. It's called sin. Wouldn't it be wonderful, wouldn't it be great, if we had a world where everything was good, everything was great, where there's no corruption, where there was no sickness, where everything just worked? Wouldn't that be great? Well, guess what? We did once. We did once. But we decided we could do better than that.

[6 : 28] It was called the Garden of Eden. And ever since we rebelled against the God who made us and put us in the garden, the world has been one long, catastrophic mess.

Murder, mayhem, death, destruction, sickness. That's the nature of the world, the kingdom that we live in. We live in the kingdom of this world.

But God has plans to bring about a new order, a new kingdom. And like all regime change, those in power do not want to give up their power.

But give it up they will, either voluntarily or under compulsion. Because the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

The prophet John the Baptist comes onto the scene and announces that a new kingdom is coming, the kingdom of heaven. Now it's been around 400 years or so now since the last prophet spoke.

[7 : 41] Australia, as we live in it now, has been settled by Europeans for about 200 years, a few more. 400 years is twice as long as that, right? 400 years is a long time.

And here in Matthew chapter 3 it had been 400 years since the last prophet of God had spoken to Israel. 400 years or so since the prophet Malachi.

And now the silence is broken. and it's in those days, right, in those days, the days that John the Baptist speaks that we're entering into now.

John the Baptist comes and preaches in the wilderness, in the desert place, the remote place. It's some 28 to 30 years or so between chapter 2 and chapter 3 and we've got very little knowledge of what happened in that time of Jesus' life.

There's a couple of things we read about. But now he's a grown man. He's no longer an infant in the region of Nazareth, in the town of Nazareth, the region of Galilee. He's a grown man and in the days of John the Baptist is preaching, that's when the days we're into now, in the region of Galilee, John starts to preach.

[8 : 54] And John the Baptist is preaching and notice what he is preaching, just see it with me. Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

there's something we need to do. Why? Because an incredible event is about to happen, the kingdom of heaven is near.

Now the kingdom of heaven is the idea of rule and if this kingdom of heaven is near, then it means revolution is in the air.

The rule of God is coming and this rule is imminent and it means that there's going to be change, there's going to be a regime change.

We're talking about the kingdom of heaven here, the kingdom that is far greater than any kingdom in this world, on this earth, because the king of this kingdom is God, the creator God himself, king of kings, lord of lords, creator of heaven and earth.

[10 : 04] God is the king of the kingdom of heaven. Not you, not me, not Rome, and no upstart president in this world.

And the kingdom of heaven is close when John the Baptist starts his preaching, everything's starting to click into place, it's like the puzzle's been put in together, there's a few pieces missing and now the last pieces are getting put into the puzzle and the picture will be perfectly clear for all to see but it's largely clear to see already.

John the Baptist comes. Now John the Baptist is the one the prophet Isaiah spoke about, as Sharon said, about 700 years or so earlier.

John the Baptist comes in fulfilment of Isaiah chapter 40 verse 3. Have a listen to this, I think it might be on the screen behind us, I'm not sure. Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her war is ended and her iniquity is pardoned that she's received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

[11:09] The exile's coming to an end, right? Chapter 40 verse 3. A voice cries in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway, for who?

For God. Isaiah 40 speaks about the end of the exile. The exile is a time when God punished his people for their rejection of him and ended up sending them to Babylon.

The exile is about to end. God is about to come and reveal his glory, his power, his might, his rule, his kingdom. But before he does, his paths need to be made straight.

That is, people need to be called to straighten out their ways. That they will turn from their sins as the preacher cries out in the desert to repent.

And here he is, John the Baptist, in the desert, near Judea. And notice his clothing, did you see his clothing?

[12:15] We're told to notice his clothing, he draws attention to his clothing, camel's hair and a leather belt. Does it remind you of somebody? It's not supposed to remind you of some hippie down in Nimbin, right?

Not to remind you of Robinson Crusoe or Tom Hanks on Castaway. It's meant to remind you of somebody else. 2 Kings chapter 1, Malachi chapter 4 and Matthew chapter 11.

We'll make it explicit. It's meant to remind us of Elijah, right? 2 Kings chapter 1, Isaiah, the king, is sick in his bed and he sent his messengers to Baal Zebub, the god of Ekron, about his future.

The messengers meet Elijah on the way and who says that this king is going to die, right? And they take that message back and Ahaz asked them, Ahaz asked them, what kind of messenger this was?

And we read in 2 Kings chapter 1 verse 7, have a look at this. And Elijah was promised to come before the great and terrible day of the Lord in Malachi chapter 4 verse 6, is the last kind of words that God had spoken 400 years ago.

[13:37] Malachi chapter 4, pick it up in verse 5, Behold, I'll send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes and he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.

A couple of things there is going to be repentance, see, turning and the potential for destruction for those who don't. And in Matthew chapter 11, come to Matthew chapter 11, read it for yourselves, Matthew chapter 11, a couple of pages forward, Matthew chapter 11, Matthew chapter 11 verse 7, Matthew chapter 11 verse 7, you got it there?

as they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John, John the Baptist, right? What did you go out in the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?

What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in king's houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet, this is he of whom it is written, behold, I will send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.

Truly, I say to you, among those born of women, there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist, yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. Yet from the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and violence takes it by force.

[15:11] For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John, verse 14, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.

John the Baptist is the most sought-after preacher in Israel, and people are coming from everywhere to see him, hundreds of kilometres to an inhospitable place.

Here's a bit of a map, hopefully you can see the map here. Got the capital Jerusalem, got the region of Judea, and the region all around the Jordan there, right? It's massive, this area.

The kingdom of heaven is near, and people from all over the region are coming out to this peculiar man to be baptised, to hear what he's preaching.

Notice what he's preaching. He's not preaching prosperity. He's not preaching stay in your sins. He's not preaching you'll be healthy.

[16:18] He's not preaching your life will be better. He is preaching repent, because the kingdom of God, when it comes, the wrath of God comes as well.

When God's kingdom comes, it will come with justice, righteous justice, and those who have not laid down their arms, those who have not voluntarily submitted to the king, those who continue to hold on to their kingdom, those who do not recognise God's kingdom, those who have not been forgiven for their sin, will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

He's preaching what God would have him preach. His baptism that he's preaching prepares God's people for the kingdom of heaven to come and people who repent are forgiven of their sins, are forgiven by God, are baptised and washed to symbolically demonstrate the forgiveness they've received in anticipation of the kingdom that is coming, the kingdom of heaven.

We're back to Matthew chapter 3. Word must have got out to the Pharisees and Sadducees and so the religious officials go and see what's going on and coming to see what all the fuss is about, what's going on down this river Jordan, that everyone is leaving Jerusalem and they're coming to you.

And they get an interesting response from John. Have a look at verse 7. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come.

[18:09] Bear fruit in keeping with repentance and do not presume to say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father. Very memorable words, aren't they?

Aren't they stood out to you? Not the kind of words you say to someone to win friends and influence people, not something you'd say if you'd be in their group to try and change their ways, it's just straight, straight talk.

yet they are words that they needed to hear. The kingdom of heaven is very, very near and then the assumption of the religious leaders of the day was that they would be first in line to enter it.

After all, they were the gatekeepers of the people of Israel's faith. But it isn't John the Baptist they need to meet. the one he is preparing Israel to meet is the one they need to concern themselves about.

They knew their scriptures, or they should have. They should have known, would have known 2 Kings chapter 1, speaking about Elijah. They would have known Malachi chapter 4, speaking about Elijah to come.

[19:22] They knew the kingdom of heaven was coming and with it the wrath of God. Elijah comes, Messiah is seen, and then the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.

Messiah is coming, the king of the kingdom is coming and he will cause a great, great, great division. And John would have the religious leaders of Israel demonstrate genuine repentance and live like God's people should live.

In the past, they were guilty of saying, we have the temple of the Lord, God's not going to judge us. The Pharisees and the Sadducees presume on their national identity for their righteousness, though they are descendants of Abraham.

But being descendants of Abraham, they think that they are God's people, God's children, of course they are God's citizens, of course they are in the kingdom of heaven. The righteousnesses of Abraham, their family name, their national identity would extend to cover them and so personal righteousness was no big deal.

But John's clear, national identity is not good enough, won't be enough, can never be enough. The axe is leaning already against the trees, ready to be swung, can't get any clearer what an axe does when it comes to the roof of a tree, it chops it down.

[20:49] The winnowing fork is ready to sift out the chaff from the wheat and the fruitless trees and the chaff will be destroyed, thrown into the fire. The officials have not confessed their sins, have not been forgiven and so the one John the Baptist is preparing the way for is far, far greater than him.

And John says there in verse 11, I baptise you with water for repentance but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, who says I'm not worthy to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire, his winnowing fork in his hand, he will clear his threshing floor and gather the wheat of the barn but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

Baptism with the Holy Spirit is biblical language, it's being cleansed inwardly and completely, given a new heart, right, the law of God written on our hearts and purified, refined from within, that's the baptism that's coming.

Now I want to point out five things to you here, ready? I want to point out five things to you here, there's not everything to point out but I want to point out five things, firstly, repentance is not an optional extra, right, it's the command, it's something that people have to do and not doing it is to disobey God, lay it down your life and it'll be spared, if you don't, you won't, when the kingdom of heaven comes.

Two, repentance is a change of mind first, followed by a change of life second, it's having a new mind, a new way of thinking about things, I used to think this way was fine, God tells me it's not, since he's the king of the kingdom, and I want to be in that kingdom, well I need to change, I need to say okay, I need to repent and so start living differently, it's a 180 degree turn, the way I used to live.

[23 : 08] Three, there's a real division, you are either in the kingdom or you are not in the kingdom, you're out of it and if you're out of it, can't say it lightly, I'm going to boast about it, but if you're not, I beg you to change because you're the chaff and John the Baptist is preparing the way for Jesus and it's Jesus himself who will do the dividing, Jesus is the one who burns the chaff in unquenchable fire and the fire doesn't go out.

There is a place called hell and we hear more about it from Jesus' lips and in the Gospels than in any other New Testament book, though there are many people in the world who will deny that it exists.

it's eternal, it's conscious. We did a whole conference on it last year, heaven and hell. Unless those who claim to have repented from their sins produce fruit in accordance with repentance, they will find themselves in it along with the rest of mankind who have rejected God's word.

Four, we mustn't be surprised when some religious leaders of the day are threatened by gospel ministry.

What would John the Baptist say to them? And five, just for this morning's sake, God doesn't have any grandchildren, only children.

[25 : 06] the Pharisees and Sadducees think they are the true Israelites, tracing lineage back to Abraham, father Abraham, great grandfather Abraham, but that doesn't save you.

What God's after is genuine repentance and faith demonstrated by bearing a good life, good fruit, one that's marked by humility, doing the works that God prepared for us to do.

It's evident in the character that is more and more in step with that of Jesus than the world. The Pharisees and Sadducees need to repent, just as all Israel needs to repent.

Let me be triply clear, what have we got to repent of? Repent of sin. Repent of rejecting God as King and living as if He doesn't exist.

Living as I am the one who makes the rules, I am the one who calls the shots, living my way without God, that is sin and that's what needs to be repented of.

[26 : 17] John's baptism was a baptised signifying repentance, however there is a baptism coming that would signify regeneration and that's the one that Jesus will give with the Holy Spirit and fire.

So the King of the Kingdom is near in verses 13 to 17 recognising Jesus. See, in Matthew chapter 3 verse 13 Jesus comes from Galilee, here's the good news, to the Jordan, to John, to be baptised by him.

John would prevent him saying, I only baptised by you but you come to me. John, well he didn't think it was his place to baptise Jesus and at one level he certainly recognised that Jesus is greater than him.

I mean, he would have known of his miraculous birth, he would have knocked around with him in the back waters of Nazareth, Galilee, he would have known him because their mothers were cousins, they were family and at one level John rightly knows that he needs to be baptised by Jesus but the baptism of Jesus is little way off yet for the baptism of Jesus will be his death and his resurrection by which new birth is given to all who trust in him and are baptised by him.

It is God's will that Jesus is baptised by John to fulfil all righteousness. What John and Jesus do is fulfil all righteousness.

[28 : 03] Jesus affirms his determination to associate with the true Israel, humble Israel, submitting to their Lord, their God, the obedient son, the true Israelite, the true servant God, and so qualified to be the true Messiah, serving the Lord.

It has to be this way for now, right? But it's going to change a bit later, in a few years' time. And John's right at one level. John is the sinner who needs to be baptised by Jesus, but at the right time.

And so Jesus continues his life by obedience to God the Father. And we see that the king of the kingdom has arrived on stage. The king of the kingdom is here, the Christ, the king in the line of David.

God is walking around the world. So when Jesus is baptised, two things happen.

Do you see what happens here? Two things happen. As Jesus comes out of the water, the spirit of God dispenses upon him, and two, God speaks again. Not only does the prophet of God speak for the first time in 400 years, but now God's voice is heard audibly for the first time in over 1400 years. [29 : 31] People hear God speak directly, audibly, and John hears it. And guess what?

So do you and I some 2000 years later? The first two chapters have shown us that Jesus is Israel personified.

The Son of God is called out of Egypt. Jesus is a true Israel, the true Son of God. And now we meet Jesus who is God the Son, the divine Son of God, who is the true servant of the Lord, fulfilling who the nation of Israel was always meant to be, but ratcheted up into levels new for us.

Verse 17 is a conflation of Isaiah 42 verse 1 and Psalm 2 verse 7. Isaiah 42 verse 1 Behold my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights.

I put my spirit upon him, he'll bring forth justice to the nations. Isaiah 42. Not only that, but he is the son of God, the anointed king, the Christ of Psalm 2, which Darrell read to us as he led us in prayer this morning.

[30 : 53] But let me show you on the screen here as well. Why do the nations rage, the people's plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord his anointed saying, let us burst their bonds apart and cast their cords from us.

He who sits in the heavens laughs, the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath and terrify them in his fury saying, as for me, I have set my king on Zion my holy hill.

I will tell the decree. Ready? Verse 7. The Lord said to me, We're to get the idea here that he's the king of the kingdom of heaven, God the Son.

And the king of the kingdom who is God the Son, who is not just some impotent old lame man snoozing on a throne, waiting to be woken up.

Nahu. The king of the kingdom of God is an awesome, powerful, conquering king who you do not want to be on the wrong side of when he exercises his justice.

[32 : 20] This is the dawning of the messianic age of the kingdom of God. The kingdom is near and the kingdom is getting nearer. Everything is now ready for the kingdom of heaven to come.

Regime change is coming. The old power brokers won't like it, the rules of the world don't like it, but the kingdom is coming and it's one that we were longing for.

A kingdom where there's good order, a kingdom where there's peace, a kingdom where injustice is dealt with, a kingdom where we are safe, where there's eternal life and prosperity, but it requires recognizing Jesus as the king and that I'm not.

It's repenting of my sin before the kingdom comes fully and finally, before the day of judgment comes, which Jesus will execute.

The baptism that Jesus brings is not a baptism of repentance, it's a baptism greater than the one that John gave. It's a baptism of regeneration, of new life, of new birth, of a new heart.

[33 : 31] That's the baptism that John needed and it's a baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire and it's a baptism that we all receive, we trust in Christ, it's a baptism that all the world needs.

It's got nothing to do with water, not full immersion,! Not sprinkling, not infant, not adult, it's a baptism with the Holy power of God at work in the baptism that Jesus brings, the power of God to change hearts, the power of God to bring the dead to life, the power of God to bring new birth and living hope, the power of God to put sin to death and the power of God that enables us to confess that Jesus Lord.

It's a baptism that washes! away sin and cleanses us from within and gives us a new heart and new hope and a new start. It's the power of God to produce fruit in accordance with repentance.

John speaks about it clearly. There's no spin, there's no around what he says, no getting around it.

God speaks very clearly and he makes no apologies for what he says and neither should we.

What is it that made John the most sought after preacher in the Middle East? What made the people travel hundreds of kilometres to a remote place to hear him?

[34 : 56] It was his message, repent for the kingdom of heaven is near. It was his manner, straight talking, truth preaching, prophet of God, not seeking the tickle the itching ears of those who came

with what they wanted to hear.

Brothers and sisters, friends, regime is coming, regime change is coming and just quietly it's the regime change that we all long for but we just often don't quite want it the way that God is going to do it.

So when does this kingdom of heaven come? When does this regime change change? we live this side of the resurrection and death and resurrection of Jesus.

So at one level the kingdom of heaven has come right? The change of ruler has happened now Jesus is on the throne but right now his rule is still being opposed by people and he's permitting them to oppose him.

But one day the kingdom of heaven is going to come for us all to see and we will see King Jesus on the throne reigning and his kingdom will be unopposed and the day spoken of here in Matthew chapter 3 will be seen in all its fullness we will see him with the winnowing fork in his hand and the threshing floor being cleaned the chaff being thrown into unquenchable fire there's only two appropriate ways to respond to really for those who have not submitted to Jesus Lord and Saviour repent now before the kingdom of heaven comes that's what you need to do there's a prayer in the bulletins that's there every week that you can pray this morning that's the kind of prayer to pray today and for those of us who have submitted to Jesus the king of the kingdom let's continue to bear fruit in accordance with repentance with a whole hearted turning away from sin let's pray our father in heaven we thank you that you have sent the prophet

[37 : 24] John and prepared the way for Jesus we thank you that Jesus came we thank you that he is obedient and obeyed you to the point of death even death on the cross thank that he died for our sins and rose again conquering sin and death and giving new life and new birth to all who would trust in him please help us to keep following him and loving him and serving him and help us to continue to bear fruit in accordance with repentance we pray in Jesus name Amen Amen