

Prayer

Walk with us on the pathway of this day dear Lord;
Open doors before us and lead us where we should go,
Close doors behind us so that we do not go back.

Place your hand on us to correct us when we wander,
Speak to us regularly lest we presume to know your will.

We ask because we love You, and give You all our praise: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Pastors

Pray for pastors who are in trouble, physically with illness, mentally with stress, or spiritually with oppression or battling with the enemy. Pray God's blessing into their lives.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for the nation of China*
- *Praise God for the joys of family life and the bonds of love*
- *Pray for all who suffer bullying or stress in the workplace*

Meditation

When the glory of a day lived with You fades within the memory, and the evening casts its shadow over all the work, the eating, the conversations, the excitement, the disappointments, the challenges and the opportunities of the day; then O Lord,

Speak Your word of truth that we may hear it,
And heal our hurting bodies where we need it:

Correct our faulty thoughts when we could do with it,
And cheer our flagging spirits because we long for it:

Bless us by Your mercy for we are lost without it,
And grant your Holy Spirit, that we may receive it:

Save us body, soul and spirit, though we don't deserve it,
For indeed; You are our Saviour, and we mean it!

Bible Study - Matthew 3:1-12

¹ *In those days John the Baptist began preaching in the desert of Judea, ² saying, 'repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'*³ *This is the man the prophet Isaiah spoke about when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the desert: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."'*⁴ *John wore clothes made of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.*

⁵ *Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea went out to him, and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶ When they had confessed their sins, they were baptised by him in the river Jordan. ⁷ But as he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he declared to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to try and escape from the coming wrath?' ⁸ Produce fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹ Do not presume to tell yourselves, "We have Abraham as our*

ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able to raise up children of Abraham from these stones! ¹⁰ Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be felled and thrown in the fire.

¹¹ 'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary; but he will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire.'

Review

In today's reading, we are launched into the story of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus Christ. It is a dramatic story in which we discover more about the social religious and political background to the story of Jesus in Matthew. John was a preacher with a radical new message; 'repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.' (3:2), and he fulfilled the famous passage from Isaiah 40:3; 'a voice cries in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the dessert a highway for our God ...' In the story of Jesus' birth (chapters 1 and 2) we saw that Matthew makes connections with the Old Testament in order to explain his story of God at work in the world, and in this passage, the scriptural connections emphasise the great importance of John to the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

John the Baptist was an extraordinary character, and more was written about him by the Jewish historian of the day, Josephus, than that of Jesus. Even in later scripture (Acts 19:1ff), he had a following quite distinct from Jesus. However, John prepared the way for Jesus' coming both in his deeds and his preaching. He openly declared himself to be subordinate to Jesus (3:11) and called Him 'Lord' within the quote from Isaiah 40 (see above); in addition, the message he preached was same as Jesus' (3:2, and for Jesus version, see 4:17). John also lived the strict life of an Old Testament prophet, modelling himself on Elijah (1 Kings 17:3, 19:3-18 etc.) by living in the desert and wearing a mantle of camel's hair (3:4). Indeed, in his lifestyle he fulfilled Jesus' teaching; 'do not worry about what you shall eat and what you shall wear' (6:25ff). He was a true individual and utterly unique; and this marked him out from the other preachers of his day who were often linked to sects such as the Qumran community (which we know from the 'Dead Sea Scrolls').

John's preaching was dramatic and it 'drew the crowds' (3:5), and the extent of his fame was such that even the Pharisees and Sadducees felt it necessary to come to hear him. These two groups symbolised strict interpretation of the Law (Pharisees) and the purity of priestly service (Sadducees), and they were sworn enemies. Even if their coming together to hear John was positive, John was having none of it, and he railed against the religious hypocrisy that both groups represented (3:7-10). John accepted the ordinary people who came to repent, but he challenged these religious authorities, reminded them that they had the 'Word of God' already, and demanded that they look to themselves and 'produce fruit worthy of repentance' (3:8).

John's preaching is full of scriptural references; for example, the remarkable words 'God is able to raise up children of Abraham from these stones' (3:9) uses Isaiah, who said 'look to the rock from which you were dug ...' (51:1). Like Isaiah, he appealed to the Israelites to realise that the God who performed a miracle to bring the Israelite nation to birth would again perform a miracle to restore his people (51:2,3). In this way, John declared his confidence that God would now establish His Kingdom and bring His Messiah, and he emphasised this with an extraordinary threat directed against any of God's unrepentant people; 'every tree that does not bear good fruit will be felled ...' (3:10); yet another quote from Isaiah, who in his early prophecies had said that Israel was like a worthless vine that would have to be broken down before it could be replanted (5:1f.)!

The highlight of John's ministry was baptism (3:11-12). In this, John was characteristically aware of his limitations. He readily directed people to the baptism that the Messiah would offer (3:11), a baptism of 'fire' rather than of 'water'. And fire it had to be, for whilst water washed the outside, fire was a symbol of the consuming presence of God; the 'breath of God', our guide again being Isaiah; 'the Lord comes ... like a devouring fire ... His breath like an overflowing stream ... to sift the nation' (Isaiah 30:27,28).

In all these ways, Matthew prepares us through the message of John for a miraculous intervention of God in human history. As we will find out tomorrow, God used His faithful servant and prophet John to anoint the Messiah for His great work of Salvation. Out of the extraordinary ministry of John, the last of the Biblical prophets, God was about to make His kingdom a reality on earth, and all history was about to change.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss the relevance and meaning of baptism as found in this passage of scripture.
2. Who was the greatest influence upon John; Elijah, or Isaiah?
3. Why would a prophet be called to live and behave in the manner of John? What was the purpose of living in the desert?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The entrance of John onto the stage of history is one of the most dramatic events in the Bible. Centuries had gone by since prophets had spoken and the people of Israel had developed their own spiritual life looking back to the prophets rather than listening to them! I sincerely hope we have not done the same thing today.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Read through what John says in his sermon about religious hypocrisy. To what extent are we guilty of this today? Discuss this if possible with others and pray simply to repent, if you feel this is right.*
- *Read a newspaper and as you do so imagine what John might have to say about the things you read. Where is the voice of John the Baptist today?*

Final Prayer

Gracious Lord, who sent the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ, into the world to bring about the Heavenly Kingdom of God and defeat all evil; so work in my life that I may show the fruits of repentance, and live my life in a manner worthy of my call; I ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. AMEN