

The Promised Prophet

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[0 : 00] Keep that passage open in front of you if you can, but let us just pray before we come to God's Word together. Father, we thank You again for Your Word.

We thank You for all that it shows and teaches us of Your precious Son, Jesus Christ. And we pray that now, by Your Spirit, You would speak to us through it, to grow us, each and every one of us, in our knowledge and love for Him, that we might live to His praise and His glory.

And it is in the name of Jesus we pray. Amen. Amen. I wonder how you are with cliffhangers. Are you one for clicking on the box in the corner of the screen straight away, even when you know you should have gone to bed two hours ago?

It wasn't so long, was it, that we had to wait a whole week for the next installment of our favorite TV show. If you're a big fan of reading, you'll be used to waiting a lot longer than that. But when a good story ends on a suspenseful note, we find ourselves eagerly waiting, looking out for the next part, don't we?

Discussing it, talking amongst each other. The tension heightens, the theories run wild, the anticipation builds. Sometimes we can't wait five seconds. Sometimes we have to wait a whole week.

[1 : 32] Sometimes we have to wait years. But none of us have had to wait as long as our old covenant brothers and sisters. Just turn back with me a couple of pages in your Bible, just two or three pages, to the last page of the Old Testament.

That is Malachi chapter 4. Part 1, okay, part 1 of the greatest story ever told ends with these last verses of Malachi, the last words spoken by God to His old covenant people.

Verse 5 of chapter 4. See, I will send Elijah. I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.

He will turn the hearts of their parents to their children and the hearts of the children to their parents or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction. The end of part 1 of the greatest story ends with a promise, doesn't it, of a great and terrible day.

A great and terrible day. Remember that for later on. A great and terrible day. And that day will be ushered in, won't it, by the appearance of Elijah, the prophet Elijah.

[2 : 58] They didn't have to look out for book 2 in the local bookstore or the next episode in the TV guide. They had to look out for Elijah. The promised prophet.

That's what they were waiting for. That's what they were looking out for. And they were waiting and waiting and waiting, weren't they? For 400 years.

Just turn back to Matthew chapter 3. What do we read about in verse 1? In those days, John the Baptist came. Who's John?

Where's he come from? What's he doing? Well, we find out when we look down to verse 4. I wonder how many personal outfits you can think of as described in the Bible.

There's not too many, are there? Maybe one or two. But the Bible doesn't describe people like we might in a book. If details are included, they are there for a very good reason. What's John wearing?

[4 : 04] His clothes were made of camel's hair. And he wore a leather belt. Weird outfit, right?

Weird outfit now. Weird outfit then. That wasn't normal in 27 BC or whenever we are. But it's a distinctive outfit.

What does Matthew, why does Matthew want his readers to know what John's wearing? You don't have to turn with me there again. But this time, I'm going to go back to 2 Kings chapter 1.

2 Kings chapter 1. We're about 800 years back from Jesus' time. That's page 367 of the church Bibles if you do want to go there. About 800 years now before Jesus' arrival.

King Ahaziah is ruling over Israel and he's brought some pretty bad news by a group of his men who bumped into a stranger on their travels.

[5 : 14] Ahaziah, unsurprisingly, wants to know who this person was. Who is this man who came to meet you? They replied, he had a garment of hair and a leather belt around his waist.

And immediately, Ahaziah, what does he say? The king said, that's Elijah. That's Elijah.

A garment of hair and a leather belt, no doubt about it. We all know who wears those clothes. That's Elijah. Back in Matthew 3, what were the people of Jerusalem and Judea thinking?

Right? When they started to hear rumors trickle in through the city gates. There's a man out in the wilderness gathering crowds people are flocking to him.

He's preaching and baptizing. And he's wearing a garment of hair and a leather belt.

[6 : 35] That's Elijah. Right? That's who we've been waiting for. For 400 years. And so, what's hardly surprising is that they flocked to him in droves.

Just look at verse 5. People went to him from Jerusalem, all Judea, the whole region of the Jordan. It's been 400 years of silence from God's prophets.

400 years of oppression for Israel from foreign powers. Here are people long, battered and bruised, clinging on dearly to the hope that maybe, maybe one day the prophet will come and bring with him a new hero for God's faithful people.

And then came John the Baptist. The prophet has finally arrived. But what does it actually mean for God's people?

That's what Matthew wants to make clear in these verses. Why has the prophet come? Why has the prophet actually come and what has he come to do? So, let's look at that in three simple points this morning as we gather what the arrival of the promised prophet means for God's people.

[8 : 06] First of all, Matthew shows us the prophet's purpose, doesn't he? The prophet's purpose. We've not been in Matthew too long, but you probably won't have been surprised to see another Old Testament prophecy brought out in verse 3.

And we see there, don't we, that John has been sent with a purpose, and that purpose was foretold long ago in the prophet Isaiah. A voice of one calling out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths for Him.

What is the prophet's purpose? The prophet's purpose is preparation, isn't it? preparation for the Lord's coming. He is here to prepare God's people for the arrival of their God.

Joe showed us really helpfully last week, didn't he? How these prophecies that Matthew quotes are part of a bigger picture than just the individual verses that he's reciting.

It's no different here. The prophecy of Isaiah 40 comes in the context of impending exile for God's people.

[9 : 39] Followed by the good news. Followed by the good news of God's coming to them.

in the arrival of God Himself to gather His sheep. An exile, remember what we saw in chapter 2 last week? An exile followed by the good news of a good God coming as a shepherd to gather His scattered sheep.

That's the wonderful promise of Isaiah 40. And in the middle of that wonderful promise is the arrival of a prophet in the wilderness.

Preparing the way for God Himself to come. It's another declaration, isn't it, of the deity of Jesus Christ. But before Jesus' ministry begins, John is sent to prepare the people.

We all prepare for big arrivals, don't we? People are coming over for dinner, we prepare foods. If guests are arriving to stay the night, we prepare the room. People are coming to view a flat for sale, we prepare the flat by cleaning it, putting a picture over a hole in the wall.

[10 : 57] Don't do that. It's a simple point, right, that the preparation depends on the purpose of the visit, doesn't it? Why is the king coming?

Verse 21 of chapter 1. The king is coming to save his people. The king is coming to save his people.

He isn't coming to be treated like royalty, so we don't need to roll out the red carpet and put our best outfit on. The king is coming to save. That's why he's coming.

So how do the people need to prepare? John gets them ready, he prepares them, doesn't he, by preaching a very clear message.

The prophet's purpose is to prepare and secondly, the prophet carries out his task by preaching. So what he does in verse 1, John the Baptist came preaching.

[12 : 14] And his sermon is pretty straightforward. Verse 2, repent, repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Turn back, turn around, stop what you're doing, stop where you're going, put the brakes on and head in the other direction. Why?

Because the king is coming. And how do most people respond? Verse 6, they repent, don't they? It's amazing, it's wonderful.

They confess their sins and are baptized. That's what repentance looks like. It's a confession that I am sinful. I need saved.

I am not good. I am not righteous. we get ready for the arrival of the king who saves by realizing that we need saved.

[13 : 30] What unites us as Christians here on a Sunday morning is not that we are good people who deserve a good future, is it?

what unites us is that we recognize we are not good and we desperately need help. If you come in here on a Sunday and look around and think you you don't belong because it seems like a bunch of good people and well actually in one way that's a really good thing, right?

It's good that we seem like good people. That means we're growing in the fruit of the spirit and being loving and kind and gentle and patient with one another. That's a really great thing. But don't think that means you can't be part of it or you can't belong because the only prerequisite for belonging in Christ's church is not any measure of goodness, not any appearance of having your life all put together.

What unites us all is that we acknowledge and confess that we are not good. That we have done things in our past that we do things in our present that are wrong, that are sinful, that we know are wrong, that our consciences tell us are wrong, that God's Word tells us is wrong.

And if we want to be prepared for Jesus' coming, what we need to do is recognize that fact. That's all John demands of the people to be ready for Jesus, isn't it?

[15 : 19] He doesn't say you've got to put your life together. He doesn't say you've got to have it all looking good to the world around you. He simply says, repent.

If you're sitting here this morning weighed down by your own brokenness, by your failures of this last week or this last year or a whole lifetime, know that you are in the right place this morning. There is no better place you could be. And what you need to do is simply confess that you're a sinner who needs to be saved and know that Jesus alone can do that for you.

It can be so easy, can't it, to sit in church and feel like a fraud? You feel like you don't belong because you feel like you alone are falling apart while everyone else seems to be on top of it all. But the reality is falling apart is where we should be, where we must be before coming to Jesus because you you are a sinner who needs saving and the person sitting on your right is a sinner who needs saving and the person sitting on your left is a sinner who needs saving and the person, let me tell you, the person preaching to you is a sinner who desperately needs saving.

[17 : 06] We gather together here every Sunday because we know we are desperately broken people and so we hear John's sermon his call to repent and in repentance we gather before Jesus in whom alone is our hope of salvation.

And it is a certain hope of salvation because why has he come? He has come to save you. The king has come to save and then people need to prepare by repenting.

They come, verse 6, don't they? Don't they? All of them confessing their sins and being baptized. It's a physical sign that they subjected themselves to as a picture of what needed to happen internally to be made clean.

But I don't know if you noticed that that's not everyone in Matthew chapter 3 is it? John's preaching is very simple, the message is very clear.

Repent and many people do but not everyone. Verse 7, the Pharisees and the Sadducees came to where he was being baptizing.

[18 : 27] Not to be baptized, to where he was being baptized and they want to see what's going on. What all the fuss is about. And John knows what they're about, doesn't he? I'm not sure that John would get a place in the welcome team.

What does he say when they show up? You brood of vipers. You bunch of snakes. Who told you to come here?

What made them a brood of vipers? It seems harsh, doesn't it? John thought they had it sorted out themselves. They thought they were fine just the way they were.

They thought they were pretty good based on their lifestyle, on the way they conducted themselves, on their good deeds, on their family history. John comes down so heavy on them, not because their life was a mess, but because they didn't think their life was a mess.

They did not think they needed to repent. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were really holy looking people. Right?

[19 : 47] Really holy looking people. people. But what's John's warning? Verse 10, it's no good looking like a healthy tree if you're not producing any fruits.

and if you're not living in repentance, the axe, he says, is waiting at the base of the trunk to cut you down. Jesus tells a great parable that Luke records for us that I think illustrates the difference in the audience John was facing perfectly.

Jesus, he says, two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed, God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven but beat his breasts and said, God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

I tell you, says Jesus, that this man rather than the other went home justified before God. How are the people to prepare for the coming kingdom?

[21 : 27] Not by looking like they have it all together but by confessing that they don't. Brothers and sisters, let us, every one of us, make sure that we know we need saving.

saving. You might well be better than some people around you. You might well do more good deeds. You might well be a kinder person. But I beg you, don't think that means you don't need saving.

Martin Luther famously said at the beginning of his 95 Theses that the Christian life is to be one of continual repentance. repentance. It never stops because we never stop needing saved.

John's purpose is to prepare the way and he prepares the way by preaching repentance. But then he finishes, doesn't he, with a promise of what's to come. I think in verse 11, John is now addressing everyone in the crowd, both the Pharisees and the people who have repented and been baptized.

And what he makes clear here, doesn't he, is that he is just the messenger. We're supposed to look straight through John, straight past John, to the one who's coming after him.

[22 : 42] There's one coming after me, he says, who is greater than I, whose sandals I'm not even worthy to carry. Carrying sandals was considered such a degrading task that Hebrew slaves weren't even allowed to do it.

Right? John is, with the whole nation gathering to him, and saying, I don't even register on the scale compared to the greatness of the one who's to come.

And the promise is that while John baptizes with water, Jesus, the one who comes after, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Right? Addressing this crowd of both repentant and the unrepentant. John says there'll be a baptism of the Holy Spirit and of fire.

Some will be baptized with the Spirit, an unbreakable seal. A sure promise have been kept until the very end. That is very good news. Others will be baptized with fire, unquenchable, everlasting fire.

[24 : 05] That is not good news. The prophet promises that the arrival of Jesus, the coming of the kingdom of God, means something for everyone.

for everyone. One king, two baptisms. One, the safety and security had been gathered into his arms.

The other being burned up with an unquenchable fire. Remember that passage we read at the end of Malachi? Elijah would come before that great and terrible day of the Lord.

the coming of the kingdom of God is great news for some and a terrifying prospect for others. For those who rely on their own righteousness, whatever that might look like, whether it's being for a prestigious family line like the Pharisees and Sadducees, whether it's our good works, our general decency compared to others, whatever it is, if it is an unrepentant life, you will be burned up with an unquenchable fire.

If that is you, please hear that warning and please repent because you too need saved.

[25 : 37] But it's not just a warning to the unrepentant, is it? Because the coming King baptizes those who do repent with the Holy Spirit.

If you were here this morning as someone who knows they're a sinner and you trust Jesus to save you, it doesn't matter how you feel this morning.

If you're on a spiritual high, that's great, but maybe you're feeling lower than you've ever felt before. Maybe you feel that your faith is on shaky ground. But if you know you're a sinner and you trust Jesus to forgive your sins, He will still gather you.

He will still save you. You are His. We all fail time and time again, don't we?

Even just this week, we've said things we shouldn't have said. We've got angry and upset. We've gossiped and grumbled. We've been unfaithful. We've been unkind, impatient, selfish.

[26 : 56] But the promise of being baptized by the Holy Spirit is a guarantee that Jesus has made you His own.

The wonderful promise Paul reminds us of in Ephesians 1 says, when you believed, you were marked with a seal. The promised Holy Spirit who is a guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession.

if you repent and believe, you are God's possession. The moment you put your faith in Christ, the moment you confessed your sin and trusted in Him to save you, you were sealed, secured forever. John says to his audience, that is to come. Paul says to one now, that has happened. Whether you feel like it or not, when it comes to the assurance of Jesus saving you, your emotions don't come into the equation.

It's great when we feel the goodness of that, isn't it? But that doesn't have to be the case for it to be completely and utterly and unchangeably true. The prophet's promise is a frightful warning to those who trust themselves, but it is the most wonderful hope for all of us who are trusting in Jesus.

[28 : 35] Just finally, before we finish up, I think it is also a powerful reminder of the importance of a task that Matthew is writing this gospel to spur us on to.

He says, doesn't he, go and make disciples. Making disciples isn't just a nice thing to do. It's not just an added bonus if people choose to follow Jesus.

Making disciples of all nations is necessary, isn't it? Because when Jesus comes once more in judgment, and he will come once more in judgment, there are no people sitting on the fence.

We have two groups, don't we, in Matthew chapter 3, and everyone is in one of those. Confessing their sins or trust themselves. Being baptized with the Spirit or being baptized with an unquenchable fire.

And if people in our family or our friends, if our colleagues at work or our neighbors are not confessing their sins and putting their trust in Jesus, us, the consequences are terrifying.

[29 : 56] There is no one out there who is innocent, no one who will be let off lightly in the last day if their trust isn't in Jesus. And so, he sends out his church, saying, go and get them.

Go and preach the same message John preached. Go and preach the same message that Jesus preached. That doesn't mean standing on your desk tomorrow morning and crying out to the office, repent. But it does mean, doesn't it, living a life that shares this wonderful hope that we who are sitting in here have the privilege of having.

Living a life that doesn't say we Christians are good people, that we Christians are broken people. just like the whole world is full of broken people.

But we have a hope because we have a Savior. We have a King who has come to save. So, come and put your hope and trust in Jesus.

That is what it means to repent. That is what John wants his audience to do. That's what Matthew wants us to do. Repent, because the King is coming.

[31 : 20] The King has come. And the good news is he has come to save his people. Let us pray before we sing our final hymn together. Amen.