

Called to Prepare

Hey, man, you packing up and leaving the hood?" asked Jamal. "You too good for everybody now?" "Man, you know I don't think that," Jasper said, maneuvering around a box and clearing off a seat for Jamal to sit down.

Jasper had been renting a run-down apartment because of the price. It was also in close proximity to his "pharmaceutical business." Drugs were rampant in this area, and police patrols were few and infrequent. It was a good place to make money.

However, for Jasper, those days were in the rearview mirror. After a near-death experience, Jasper had heeded the years of pleas and prayers from his family and had given his heart to Christ. His crew had said it was like a deathbed confession and did not expect it to "take."

That was six months ago, and Jasper was now exploring his new life in Christ. He heeded the voice of his new Christian friends and found a better apartment away from his old drug-filled neighborhood.

"Drugs are everywhere, man," said Jamal.

"Yeah, I know," answered Jasper. "But I am God's man now. I know the Lord is going to use me. I know He has a lot in store for me."

"Like what?" asked Jamal.

"I don't know yet," said Jasper. "But just like I made preparations for crime and craziness, I'm going to get myself ready for good to come!"

1. What comfort zones do you need to leave so Jesus can totally change you?

2. What risky limbs have you climbed out on in the past for the sake of Christ?

3. How did you grow spiritually from stepping out on those risky limbs?

LESSON FOCUS: Prepare for Jesus to change you.

Preparing Hearts

Matthew 3:1-6, KJV

1 In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea,

2 And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

3 For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

4 And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey.

5 Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan,

6 And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.

Matthew 3:1-6, NIV

¹In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea ²and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." ³This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

"A voice of one calling in the wilderness,

'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

⁴John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan.

⁶Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

As part of the preparation to receive their King, John told his listeners to repent of their sins because the kingdom of heaven was at hand. To receive their King properly, the people's hearts needed to be right. Unlike earthly kings who can only look upon the outward appearances of people, the Lord can see into their very hearts. And because of this, their hearts needed to be dealt with first in order to receive Him properly.

Hundreds of years earlier, the prophet Isaiah had foretold John's ministry of preparing the people for their King (Isa. 40:3). John would be the voice of one in the wilderness calling the people to make the way straight for the Lord. When we think of a straight line, the idea of the shortest distance between two points likely comes to mind. However, the

word used for “straight” in both the Hebrew and Greek carries with it the idea of being right and good. Therefore, the one who would come to prepare the way of the Lord was to make His path right and good. For the people to receive Him properly, they had to get their hearts right first, and repent.

As a result, many people came to confess their sins and be baptized by John. This is what the people were doing in preparation to receive their King then, and this confession is what people still need to do in preparation to receive Him today.

4. *What was the content of John’s message in the wilderness?*

5. *What was the purpose of John’s message in the wilderness?*

6. *How did the people respond to John’s message?*

Provoking Hearts

Matthew 3:7-10, KJV

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

8 Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance:

9 And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.

10 And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

Matthew 3:7-10, NIV

⁷But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰The 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.”

When John confronted the Pharisees and Sadducees he called them a brood of vipers. That John's approach was provocative indicates that sometimes people need a wake-up call to see just how far from God they are.

After referring to the religious leaders as vipers, John then asked who had warned them about the wrath that was coming. He challenged them to show the fruit that is the product of true faith and repentance. Today, those whose hearts are hard against the things of God need to understand that though He is patient, His patience has its limits—there will be consequences for the continued rejection of God's Son.

John also told the religious leaders that their faith in being children of Abraham was misplaced. That God could turn stones into children of Abraham demonstrated that physical lineage had absolutely nothing to do with their spiritual standing before God. Likewise, people today need to beware of the potential for misplaced faith. A person raised in a Christian home doesn't automatically become a child of God.

If there was ever a group of people who might have confidence that their good works and religious position could make them right with God, it was these religious leaders. However, no amount of religious works can make us right with God. Only by turning from our sin (repentance) and trusting the Savior for forgiveness from sin (true faith) can we have a right relationship with God and escape the wrath to come.

7. *What group of people came to where John was baptizing, and what did he call them?*

8. *What did John say they were relying on to be right with God?*

9. *What warning did John have for them?*

Prevailing upon Hearts

Matthew 3:11-12, KJV

11 I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance. but he

Matthew 3:11-12, NIV

^{11a}I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me

KJV

that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire:

12 Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

NIV

comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Just before their true King made His public appearance to be baptized (vss. 13-17), John prevailed upon his listeners one more time to be prepared to receive their King. The prophet understood his proper place with the Lord, declaring that he was not even worthy to carry Jesus' shoes. John baptized with the water of repentance, but He who is more powerful than John would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Both here at the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry and at the end of it, we find the promise of the Spirit's work in the lives of believers. When Jesus was about to depart by way of Calvary's cross, He eased His disciples' hearts with the promise that He would send them the Comforter, the Holy Spirit who would abide with them forever (John 14:16).

John urged his listeners to understand that every person must choose which fire they will ultimately face. Those who put their faith in Jesus will be baptized by the Holy Spirit and fire, a picture of purification from sin in a person's life. However, those who reject Jesus will face the unquenchable fires of judgment like useless chaff that is left over from the harvest. Like John's listeners some 2,000 years ago, people today also must choose which fire they will ultimately face.

10. *Though John was a fearless prophet, how did he demonstrate true humility?*

11. *How did John's baptism and the Lord's differ?*

12. *What final warning did John give his listeners?*

True Repentance Leads to Change

What is true repentance? It is more than just saying, "I am sorry." It involves much more than the outward show of walking down an aisle over and over for "rededication." True repentance produces good spiritual fruit.

The Greek word for "repentance," *metanoia*, breaks down into two parts: *meta*, meaning change, and *noia*, meaning mind. The Holy Spirit renews our mind (Rom. 12:2) through the Word of God. Only the Word of God can transform our minds into the likeness of Christ (see Eph. 4:23-24). A change of mind leads to a change of heart or a heart shift not only in our mind, but also our will and emotions. It is much more than merely the emotion of worldly sorrow: "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death" (2 Cor. 7:10).

Changing our mind and heart involves changing the direction of our spiritual walk. It is as if we are walking one direction and we turn completely 180 degrees in the opposite direction. We turn away from the sin in which we are participating, and we turn completely toward Christ in obedience to His commands and purposes. To run in the opposite direction of Christ is to run in utter rebellion.

When we spiritually change our direction, we change our lifestyle as well as our destiny. A right spiritual walk with God produces peace that surpasses understanding (Phil. 4:7). We can choose to walk with Christ or away from Him. True repentance is obedience that leads to a new way of life that is fruitful and pleasing to Jesus Christ.

13. *Why is true repentance more than being sorry for what you have done?*

14. *How fruitful is your spiritual life for Christ? What inhibits maximum fruit production?*

15. *In what ways has the Holy Spirit and the Word transformed your life into His likeness? What further changes are needed?*

A Supernatural Change in Your Life

According to Pastor Vance Havner, repentance is actually a change of mind about sin, self, and the Savior. True repentance involves seeing we are sinners, knowing we can't improve ourselves under our own power and will, and asking Jesus to be the one to save us from our lives of sin. The Holy Spirit then works on us to transform us supernaturally into a "new creation. . . . The old has gone, the new is here!"

► *How has the Lord brought about real change in your life through the power of the Holy Spirit? What areas of your life still require true repentance as you respond to His change?*

KEY VERSE

For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. —Matthew 3:3, KJV

For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for the Lord.'" —Matthew 3:3, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of December 28 through January 3

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

- Mon.** Deuteronomy 8:1-11—Live by God's Word.
- Tues.** Leviticus 25:8-17—Jubilee, the Year of God's Favor.
- Wed.** 1 Kings 17:7-16—The Miracle of the Meal and Oil.
- Thurs.** 2 Kings 5:1-14—Naaman's Leprosy Healed in Jordan River.
- Fri.** Luke 4:1-13—Jesus Overcomes the Devil's Temptations.
- Sat.** Luke 4:23-30—Jesus Is Driven out of Nazareth.
- Sun.** Luke 4:14-22—Jesus' Mandate for Ministry Announced.