

Matthew 19-02-24a

Good morning, this is Sunday, the 24th of February, 2019. We continue our study in the book of Matthew, picking up this morning in chapter 3. Chapter 3. Let's take a moment to ask God's blessing on our fellowship and our study, and then we'll begin. Father, we're grateful for this time of fellowship, of refreshment, and looking at the resources, the riches found in your Word.

We're grateful for the opportunity to look at the Lord Jesus Christ at first hand through the Gospel accounts, and particularly this Gospel of Matthew that presents so clearly His words and work. It seems as though it were some time ago, and yet when we travel through this account, we find ourselves alongside the Lord, listening to His teaching and watching His example. And we are grateful for that opportunity and ask that the Holy Spirit will bless it to each heart as we seek to understand the implications for our own lives, how we should live, and invest our time and our opportunities in the time that is allotted to us here before the Lord Jesus returns a second time to take us to Himself, to transfer us to the new and greater world of opportunities that comes in His kingdom and in yours.

We pray that as we spend this time together, that our spiritual gifts will provide edification and encouragement to our fellow believers, that we can receive that same blessing from them, and that all of us together can grow in grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus. We pray these things in His name. Amen.

Well, it's exciting to be looking at a Gospel, as I mentioned before. I was surprised at how much time had passed since we had done the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of Luke, and the Gospel of John most recently, but that's still been several years ago. And it's nice to be in the pages of your new King James where there's red ink, and that's where we're headed.

So by way of quick review, we saw Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 last time, and the function of those chapters is to take time and compress it for us. Similar, we find it happening in the first couple of chapters of Genesis. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, covers an unknown but probably capacious amount of time.

And then we are brought to the surface of the earth, and ultimately we are brought to God forming Adam out of the dust of the ground and walking him around in the garden. And so it is a view of the universe, and then a view of the earth, and then a view of the surface of the earth, and the work that God does to shape it and prepare it for man's occupancy. Then the creation of man himself, and then with Adam created, God plants a garden on the sixth day and brings Adam into it and acquaints him with the animals as he names them and ultimately demonstrates his need for help and then creates that help.

And so there is sort of a reverse telescope effect where you start very broad and very wide and end up very close and very near. The same thing happens in these chapters where we begin with the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ and we span the centuries from Abraham through David through the captivity and then from the captivity to the time of the birth of the Lord Jesus. And the names that are included in that list are reminders of God's grace, of God's inclusive plan of salvation beginning with Abraham and the promise that he would be a blessing to the Gentiles.

There is a strong communication of universality that although God is working through his people Israel, his salvation is not limited to them. He is going to work in them and through them to bring salvation to the world. And the genealogy reflects that.

Its symmetry and its structure in 14 generation sections is designed to remind us that God imposes an order and it's an order of his own making. We don't count generations the way Matthew chapter 1 does. We want to find a number to assign and say it's 40 years or it's 35 years or it's some set period of time.

But in God's economy you can be added to or subtracted from generations depending on your faith. And his notion of a generation will take out the people associated with Athaliah for example. And it will include women of faith who were outside Israel such as Rahab and Ruth.

And you find that the way God accounts his ways are higher than our ways and his thoughts are higher than our thoughts. But what we do understand and where we do come to a firm conviction is that God has structure and order to his plan and it proceeds according to his timetable and it proceeds toward an objective. All of those things apply to us.

Is there a time for every purpose under heaven? And does that apply to us? Yes it does. We sometimes would like the timing to be different. We would like the structure to be different.

We would like things to happen more quickly or more slowly. We would like some things to persist that don't continue. We would like other things to come that haven't come yet.

Remember the Apostle Paul, even so come Lord Jesus. And all of us would be happy if that happened today. But we recognize and we are reminded in that structure in the first chapter that God's plan is orderly and it is progressive.

It progresses through stages that take time. And in our own lives God's plan progresses through stages that take time. Then we saw very quickly the birth narrative and the fulfillment of prophecy.

And you see an increasingly clear anticipation of the coming of the Lord Jesus and its announcement. It was foreseen in Isaiah as you begin to recognize that there is an

individual who is going to be the suffering servant who is going to be wounded and bruised for iniquity and transgression. And that by his stripes we, the people of God, are healed.

And Israel then and since has tried to picture themselves as the suffering servant. Israel is the suffering servant on behalf of the world. But it is quite clear that if by his stripes we are healed, you can't be both the healer and the healee.

And Isaiah is addressed to Israel. And all we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way.

The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. Israel cannot be both the servant and the one who benefits from the servant's suffering. It is clear that there is an individual who is coming.

And they expected this. And it was recognized theologically. It was recognized by anyone who had an interest in the word that someone was coming.

That the Lord was going to send a Messiah, a Savior. And there was even speculation that there might be two. One would be the suffering servant.

And would accomplish redemption and propitiation for the sins of God's people. And then there would be another second Messiah who would come and be the Davidic king. And usher in the millennial age.

The age of peace and turning swords into plowshares. And spears into pruning hooks. And war would cease.

Strife and affliction would cease. And God's blessings would be fulfilled to the nation. And whether there were two separate individuals or one who would combine both roles.

If there is one who combines both roles. There is a necessary concomitant understanding. Because if he is going to suffer and die to accomplish redemption.

And yet he is also going to be the eternal king of the kingdom. What has to happen? He has to come back. And those who studied the law recognized that there were pictures of resurrection.

In many parts of the law. The Azazel goat. There are two goats.

You have to use two to get the picture. One dies and the other is smeared with the blood and sent into the wilderness. The doves that were sacrificed for the cleansed leper in Leviticus 14.

One dies. His blood is mixed with living water. And the other one is doved with it and is set free.

And this picture of resurrection was necessary to combine the two roles that Messiah would fulfill. The suffering servant and the conquering king. And so as we have noted many times.

When John the Baptist was in prison. And he sent his messengers to the Lord Jesus. And he said.

Are you he that shall come or do we wait for another? He already knew that he was the suffering servant. Because he identified him at the Jordan. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

So his question was. Are you he that shall come? Are you the coming conquering king also? Or should we look for. Is it one Messiah or two? And Jesus doesn't answer him directly.

As is so often his way. He says. Process the information you have.

Go back and tell John what you see. The lame walk. The blind see.

The deaf hear. The gospel is being preached to the poor. Those are all associated with the conquering king.

And the coming of peace and the fulfillment of blessings to God's people. Which tells John by putting his clues together. That yes he is both the Lamb of God and he is the son of David.

And he is the king. He is both. Which also tells John.

There is a resurrection. And John can confidently go to the chopping block. So that his head can be served on a platter.

To Herod. Because he has been assured by the son of God himself. That there is a resurrection.

There is a lot in that account. But in our first two chapters of Matthew. The focus is increasingly close.

From across the ages of the time of the patriarchs and the nation of Israel. All the way down to the point where Jesus is born. And prophecy is fulfilled.

And then wise men from the east come. Gentiles are the first to recognize him as king. He is going to save his people from their sin.

That is Matthew 1.21. Right? Call his name Yeshua. He will save his people from their sins. That is the suffering servant.

And we know from other passages. That Mary is told that a sword is going to pierce her

heart. And there is going to be sorrow associated with that role.

And that mission. But immediately after that. In the second chapter of Matthew.

What do you have? Not only is he the one who is going to save his people from their sins. By being bruised for their iniquities. And wounded for their transgressions.

But wise men from the east. Who are Gentiles. Come and say.

Where is he who is born? What? Savior of the Jews? King of the Jews? King of the Jews? And those who are watching. Like Simeon and Anna and Mary and Joseph. And that circle of informed and seeking believers.

As soon as they hear the story of the wise men. There has been a star in the east. God's celestial book of heaven has communicated.

That this child is a king. He is both. He is both.

So then after the divine warning in a dream. That they should not return to Herod. They departed for their own country another way.

And then you have the flight to Egypt. And the murder of those children. Herod's ham-fisted attempts to prevent any insurrection.

Or some popular grassroots movement. That might supplant him as king. And why he thinks he needs to do this.

He is an old and sick king as it is. He is going to die very shortly. And he is killing two year old and under children.

Because they could be the threat for a future king. You might think, well, he has got to be nutty. Because he knows he is not going to be facing a threat 20 years down the road.

Why does he want to kill them now? Why does he want to snuff out this potential king that the wise men are talking about? Why does he want to kill him as an infant? Why do you think? In the history of Israel, have there been boy kings? That popular sentiment has lifted up to the throne. And then their managers and their caretakers and their mentors actually run the kingdom until he grows into it. And Herod is not so much concerned about the personal threat as he is the movement.

The notion of rebellion and insurrection with this child as its focus. He is not concerned with Jesus himself. He is concerned with those who would recognize him as king.

And Herod's legitimacy as king is somewhat questionable. And to find someone who is in the line of David, it is the movement that he is worried about. So he perpetrates this

heinous crime against children in his own interest.

And to try to preserve his own way of life. And you can find applications for that in the modern day. There are children who suffer whether it is death before birth.

Whether it is neglect after birth. Whether it is being shuffled off into circumstances that are horrible. Because people are self-interested and want to preserve their priorities.

And what gratifies them. And children suffer. You have never had a time where there is so much done to children.

To include drugging them. To include shuffling them off to the care of others. Because I've got a lifestyle to maintain.

And so I or one or both parents are working all the time and traveling. And so we'll put them in the care of others. They grow up like weeds.

There is no consistency. There is no nurture. There is no bringing up in a Christian environment where there is inculcation.

And the instilling of Christian values. And reflecting Christian values and Christian faith by example and by consistency. Let the church do it.

Let the school do it. Let daycare do it. Let the coach do it.

Let the person who gives lessons in some skill do it. All we are is managing transportation. We just have to get them from one place to another.

And keep them in the hands of others. That leaves me free to do other things for most of the day. And children are sacrificed.

This is a graphic example and a murderous example. But the principle of it is played out more often than it should be. Even in Christian circles.

You cannot defer. And you cannot transfer. And you cannot delegate the responsibility for children.

But it's done all the time. So then we finally find that Mary and Joseph and the Lord Jesus come and dwell in a city called Nazareth. In verse 23 of chapter 2. That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets.

He shall be called a Nazarene. And this of course is a word play. Because he is a root shoot from the stump of Jesse.

Which is a netzer. Nazareth was named from a slightly different word. But it's a subtlety.

It's a clue that you pick up indirectly. It's not so much science as art. To identify the parts

of the Old Testament that anticipate the life and the events in the life of the Lord Jesus.

You have to be sensitive and you have to understand the way God speaks and the way he works. And many times he uses an adumbration or an anticipation or an echo. That's going to continue now as we come to chapter 3. Let's read the first part of this.

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Now John himself was clothed in camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist.

And his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, Brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, We have Abraham as father, for I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.

And even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees, therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

His winnowing fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." So here in Matthew we have the account of John the Baptist, his ministry, and his function summarized in a dozen verses. We begin at the beginning here, and it says, In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea. This is a fascinating couple of verses here, the first few verses of this chapter, in terms of hermeneutics, Bible interpretation.

We all like to say that we take the Bible literally. The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it. If it says it, that's what it's got to be.

I don't want anybody shoehorning in extra amounts of time. You can tell I'm working on my God and Science, or the Bible and Science special that will be coming up here shortly. But I'm reviewing all of the bloody debates about the Creation Week, and the Institute for Creation Research, and the people who are hardcore, young-earth, 24-hour-a-day creationists, will club you to death with their Bible.

They will take the biggest King James Bible they can find, and just smack you in the pulp with it, saying you can't shoehorn time into the Bible when it plainly says what it plainly

says. Take a look at our verse. Read verse 1 to yourself.

What does it say? In those days John the Baptist came preaching. In what days? Well, using our literal hermeneutic, the days indicated by the previous verse, right? In those days, the days when Joseph and Mary and Jesus went to live in Nazareth. In those days.

They couldn't stay down in Judea because they were warned by the angel, and so they went up to Nazareth that it might be fulfilled what was spoken about the prophet, and he should be called a Nazarene. In those days. So how old is Jesus? Three, four years old? In those days? Oh, Sam, you're shoehorning 30 years into the gap between chapter 2, verse 23, and chapter 3, verse 1. You're shoehorning in three decades.

You have to read the Bible the way it was designed to be read, the way it was written. And in those days is not the same days that Mary and Joseph arrive in Nazareth. It's 30 years later.

We know this. There's no question that John the Baptist did not start preaching. How much older than Jesus is John? Not more than a couple of years, right? Mary goes to visit Elizabeth when she's six months pregnant, and very soon after that the Lord Jesus is born.

John is born, and very soon after that the Lord Jesus is born. They're not more than a year or two apart. So if they've stayed down in Egypt for a year or two, and they've come back, Jesus is maybe four years old, so John is, what, five or six in those days? So a six-year-old John the Baptist with his tiny little camel's hair coat is not going to be out there in the wilderness preaching.

A long period of time has elapsed, and yet it says, in those days. In those days is simply a transitional phrase looking back from the standpoint of the time that the gospel was written. The gospel of Matthew was probably written mid-century, 20, 30, as many as 40 years after.

It doesn't appear to have existed during the life of the Apostle Paul. He doesn't quote from it. It doesn't seem to have circulated to any of the early writers.

None of the epistles quote Matthew. And your epistles tend to have all been written by 65 A.D. or so. So the gospel of Matthew is set down several decades after the fact.

So in those days, looking back, it's not such a big gap. In those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Change your mind.

He is preaching in the wilderness of Judea. Other conditions have changed because Joseph was warned not to stay in Judea because there was a lot of hostility about the possibility of there being a threat to the throne, a rival king or a rival movement that

would undermine the authority of the king. And so Archelaus is reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod in verse 22 of the previous chapter.

Well, Archelaus is likely to have the same hostility that Herod had. He's Herod's son. And he doesn't want a threat any more than Herod did.

So it's still not safe. And so Mary and Joseph and the Christ child move north. Now John the Baptist is preaching.

So there is an opportunity here to be more vocal, to be more proactive about the kingdom of God coming. If he says, the kingdom of heaven is at hand, as soon as the king of the existing kingdom hears that somebody is preaching an alternate kingdom, that's a threat. But time has moved on.

This is nearly 30 years later. Change your mind. He is preaching in the wilderness of Judea.

Why is he in the wilderness preaching? And we've asked this question before. If you want to reach a big audience, you want to assemble a big audience, right? So if John's got a message for the people of Israel, why isn't he on the steps of the temple in Jerusalem? Why is he not in the marketplace? Why is he not standing up on the last great day of the feast and addressing the assembled crowds who have come from all over Israel for any one of the three assembly feasts? Many of them coming with their families, the men of Israel. Where does he go to make this important announcement? He's in the wilderness.

Now, what is wilderness? When I was a little boy, I had a mental picture of wilderness that was kind of sand dunes and bare, rocky outcroppings. This is near the Jordan River, and it is pasture land. It's grassy.

It's got trees. It's got shrubs. It's got wildlife.

We know this, that there is an abundance of plants because there are an abundance of bees making an abundance of honey, enough for a man to live on. And there are locusts who also live on plant life. So it's not a bare or barren desert, wasteland.

It is simply wilderness. It's uninhabited pasture land. Drive around here in northeast Oklahoma, and there's wonderful, beautiful, uninhabited land, but it's not desert in the sense of no life.

It's just sparse human occupation. So he is near a river, a source of water, and as we'll see, he is living off the land. But he is preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and as soon as you say he's preaching in the wilderness, that's not the normal place to assemble a crowd.

You wonder how the crowds ever started coming. Eventually, it tells us that Jerusalem,

Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out there. The modern Christian model is we've got to assemble a crowd.

We've got to attract them and draw them in. We've got to use a movie or a concert or some popular approach that will be appealing and enticing and will cause people to come in, and then we will preach to them. We'll bring them in for one thing, and then we'll include the gospel.

While we've got them there, we can then share the truth. It's kind of mean-spirited to say it's bait and switch, but that's the principle. You bait them with one thing, and then you switch to what you really want to tell them.

John's approach is the exact opposite. He is in the wilderness preaching, and he's preaching a message of conviction. He's preaching a message to the people of Judea.

You need to change. Repent means change your mind. There is something wrong with you, and you need to fix it.

The first word out of John's mouth is repent, reverse, change. Change your minds. Why? The kingdom of heaven has come near.

This is a perfect tense. He doesn't say it is coming. He doesn't say it will come.

When he says at hand, this is literally the kingdom of heaven has come. It's a perfect tense. The kingdom of heaven has come.

The tenses here are really interesting, because in those days, John the Baptist came. Past tense, right? And as he came, he is preaching in the wilderness and saying, repent, the kingdom of heaven has come. What's the tense in verse three? This is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah saying, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.

Why is he preaching in the wilderness? That's what the Bible tells him to do. He is the voice of one crying in the wilderness, and it is both an instruction for his mission, for Malachi chapter four, verse five. It is also a fulfillment of Isaiah chapter 40 and verse three.

And so people who know their Bible, when they hear that there's somebody preaching in the wilderness, this is out of the ordinary. People never preach in the wilderness. So if somebody's preaching in the wilderness, this should alert anyone who is prophecy sensitive that God is doing a new thing.

But you notice the present tense, this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah. I am persuaded that when you have the quotation marks in verse two, repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand, and then they close the quote. I don't think so.

I think that quote goes all the way down to the end of verse three. John himself says, this meaning me is he. This is he.

Why doesn't Matthew just say this was he who was spoken? Everything else is past tense, but this is he who was spoken of. You wouldn't necessarily die for that, but I would imagine that the content of John's preaching includes scripture, such as Isaiah 40, verse three, prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight. Do you remember your scripture? I'm out here in the wilderness and I'm telling you, I'm the guy.

This is the time. And we saw that anticipation of time throughout Matthew chapter one, the time has progressed, the generations have passed, and it is time to prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight. Spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, how many times now have we seen this time as the fulfillment of prophecy? But to recognize the fulfillment of prophecy, you've got to know your scriptures.

And this is why we spend so much time looking at scripture, so that we too can be aware of God's timing and God's work. Repent is a present imperative, and it means you need to be in a process of changing your mind. Be changing your mind.

There's a lot of areas for change of mind. There's a lot of decisions and priorities and goals and values that need changing. It's not just a simple, oh, okay, change my mind.

My mind has changed. What does he mean, change your mind? Change your mind about what? This is lifestyle. This is behaviors.

This is treatment of one another. This is attitude toward the government. This is attitude toward the word of God.

This is a complex thing. The mind is not simple, is it? So, if God says, change your mind, well, this is going to be a process, and that's why it's a present imperative. Aorist imperative is you've got to start fresh and do a command.

Present imperative has the notion of an ongoing process. Be changing. Keep on changing.

Remember in 1 John, if we keep on walking in the light as He keeps on being in the light, we keep on having fellowship, and the blood of Jesus Christ keeps on cleansing us. Present. Present imperative.

So, for us, we also need change of mind. Are our minds fully where they should be? Is there any part of our mind that is still headed the wrong way, pointed the wrong direction, thinking the wrong things? There's always some part of us that needs repentance, that needs improvement. Doesn't matter how old we get, doesn't matter how long in the tooth we are, or how many years we've been in church, there's always some part of us that needs change, because we are not sinless and we're not perfect.

So, where are the parts where we need to repent? You can't just give up. You can't say, well, if I haven't changed by now, I'm not going to change. If you're breathing air, it's not too late.

These people that heard of John and went out there and then heard him at first hand, and he says, change your mind. Well, once they hear that, what are they supposed to do? We're actually going to find out a little bit later in this chapter. They say, okay, change our minds, what should we do? And he's going to tell them.

This is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Now, is God limited in his ability to move so that he can't travel unless we build him a road? It's a little bit of a trick question. Does God need his way prepared? Does he need a straight path before he can travel? Yes or no? John is saying, prepare the way and make his path straight.

Why does he need that preparation? Why does he need those straight paths? Can't he just come anyway? It's kind of the wrong way to ask the question, because he can, but he won't. Are there things that we can do, but we don't do? Because we've got our reasons? I could give my young child 50 bucks and send them to the mall. Do I have 50 bucks? Can I get them to the mall? But I don't.

Why? That's a terrible way to raise a child. Give them 50 bucks and send them off to the mall for no good reason. There would have to be a special circumstance.

It's their birthday, there's a birthday party at the mall, something. But there are things that we can do that we don't do. I can drive my car down the highway at 120 miles an hour as fast as I can get the thing to go, but I don't.

The fact that God is omnipotent and can do things doesn't mean that he is going to do everything he can do. The Lord can come without a prepared way and without a straight path, but he won't. He won't.

He refuses to. Remember our memory verse? The Lord's arm is not shortened that he cannot save. His ear isn't heavy that he cannot hear.

Your iniquities are stronger than God. Your sins can hide the omnipotent deity. This is the problem with people who overplay the omnipotence card and the sovereignty card.

God can and will do what God can and will do. But God limits himself. God refuses to do certain things that he can do, and he will not hear our prayers if we have not complied with the conditions that make those prayers heard in heaven.

If we haven't forgiven one another, if we haven't identified iniquity and sin and confessed it and claimed God's cleansing grace and his forgiveness, he's not going to hear our prayers. Can he hear them? Do they technically register? He's not going to

honor them. He's not going to pay attention to them.

Our prayers don't get any higher than the ceiling, and it's not God's limitation. It is our problem. So when John says, prepare the way of the Lord and make his path straight, this is a condition for the Lord to come.

Now, did the kingdom of heaven approach? Had it come near in these days? Was the kingdom near? John says it was near. He says the kingdom of heaven has come near. Did the kingdom of heaven come in? Did it get established? Did these people enter into the kingdom of heaven? No.

God got tired, and just about the time he was going to deliver the kingdom, he just ran out of gas and had to rest? No. This is what puts a giant wooden stake through the heart of Calvinism. God will not just do what he arbitrarily and sovereignly could do.

He expects decisions. He expects change of mind, and he conditions his behavior on what people choose. It's just a fact of scripture.

God does not sovereignly override. If God wanted his kingdom to come in, it wouldn't matter what these people said, baptize them or not. The kingdom would have just come thumping down out of heaven, right on top of Jerusalem, crushed the Pharisees, crushed Archelaus, and there it would be.

I don't care if you want it or not. Here it is. I'm God.

Live with it. It's not how God works. The kingdom has come near.

He has announced it. It was prophetically anticipated. The Messiah has fulfilled all kinds of signs as he's on the way, and they've got to prepare the way, and they've got to make the path straight.

And the same is true for you and me. If we want the grace of God active in our lives, if we want the power of God manifest in our lives, if we want to be blessed and be a blessing, if we want to bear fruit of righteousness, we have to change our minds. God is not going to do it for us.

He's not going to override us, and he is not going to establish his presence and his power within us unless we have his word and keep it. We decide whether the kingdom comes in. We decide whether there is an inheritance, whether there is a future, whether we are going to be in the kingdom or out.

He came unto his own in John 1, and his own received him not. The kingdom of heaven has come near. Are you going to receive it or not? Change your mind.

You have not been receiving the things of God, John the Baptist says. Start receiving them. Change your mind.

Prepare. Make a straight path so that God will be willing to come. He is able, but is he willing? He is the voice of one crying in the wilderness, and that present tense is also pertinent down through the ages.

John still calls. He is a voice calling in the wilderness in which we all dwell. There is the potential for life.

There is the opportunity for the presence of God, but it depends on us. Now, John himself was clothed in camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. With apologies to all of the vegans and vegetarians who don't want to wear shoes that are made out of actual hide, John the Baptist, God's messenger, wore a leather belt.

Something died, and he wore a leather belt. Sandals in those days were made out of leather. John says, the one coming after me wears sandals, leather sandals.

Jesus wore sandals made of leather. So, I don't think you can in good conscience object too strongly when God's prophet and God's son use leather products. I'm just saying.

John himself was clothed in camel's hair. We'll talk about this when we come back from the break, but he is identifiable as a prophet of God. When God wants to give us a message, it will come from an identifiable, recognizable, authoritative source.

God authenticated his messengers in the Old Testament day with miracles. He authenticated the apostles in the New Testament day with miracles. John the Baptist does no miracle, not a single one.

He doesn't part the Jordan. He doesn't rain manna from heaven. He doesn't heal.

So, what is his authentication? How do people know that he is the last and greatest of the Old Testament prophets, as Jesus will say later? How do they know if he hasn't done a miracle? What authenticates him? He is the embodiment of Elijah. He lives where Elijah lived in the wilderness. He looks like Elijah looked with his clothing.

He delivers the message that Elijah delivered, which is repent. He is quoting Old Testament scripture, and he is at the Jordan River. The Jordan was the place of the decision.

Are you going to cross the Jordan into the land of promise? Remember the first time Israel came to the land and sent in the spies, and they refused, and that generation all died. This generation is going to be brought to recognition of the nearness of the kingdom, and they're going to miss it, just like their forefathers who died in the wilderness. And it will be a second and later generation that is actually going to cross the Jordan and go into the land.

And his appearance in the Jordan near Jericho is no accident. It is symbolic. Everything about John.

He's a Nazarite from birth. He is a unique, dedicated, committed prophet of God, speaking the word of God in the place that God appointed, the wilderness and the Jordan. And those are his ID card credentials.

That's what authenticates him. And he is recognized as a prophet. And this is a part of it in verse 4. So we'll look at that.

How can we know that a message is from God? How do we know that an interpretation of the word of God is from God? Now we've got the scriptures, but one of the constant criticisms of the Bible is, well, you can make it say anything you want. You've got people all over the map saying that the Bible means all kinds of things. And you've got a proliferation of just hundreds of different Christian denominations, no two of whom, even people in the same denomination, can't agree on what the Bible teaches.

So how do we know the authoritative word of God the way it was identifiable here, the way it was identifiable in the days of miracles? Well, there is an answer to that question, and we'll look at it when we come back from our break.