

Week 2: Being preparing for Entry into the Kingdom.

MEDITATING ON GOD’S WORD: This week we take a bite of Scripture — Matthew 3:1-12 – chew on it until it nurtures, talking about it until it speaks personally to us, plotting how to obey it and pondering it until insights of understanding are sparked in our minds.

BACKGROUND ON PREPARING THE WAY FOR THE KING:

In the Old Testament, there is a long history of God anointing kings to represent his leadership to his people Israel and instructing them in what to do and what not to do. For example, King David apparently carefully followed God’s laws given to him by the Levitical priests. From how he led the nation, we can safely conclude that he followed Moses’ instructions in Deuteronomy 17:18-20, i.e., he wrote down for himself God’s laws, kept them with him and read them daily.

However, after David this habit of writing for oneself God’s law broke down. David’s son and successor, King Solomon, who also seems to have started off continuing to write God’s law for himself, keep it with him and read it every day, eventually stopped this discipline. The result was that he, in time, turned away from the Lord. This set up a dynamic within Ancient Israel that led to her splitting into two nations, i.e., Israel in the north, and Judah in the south.

Each of these divided countries had their own kings. After the nation split, all the kings in the north maintained an idol worshiping system first established by Jeroboam. Judah had some faithful kings and some who worshiped idols. The unfaithful kings also quit writing down God’s law for themselves and reading it daily. This set up the internal dynamics that over time led to a weakening of her character, her strength and her prosperity as a nation. Ancient Israel/Judah was no longer a world power in the Middle East.

In time, Israel/Judah was threatened, dominated, conquered and ruled for centuries by the more powerful nations around her. For instance, Assyria attacked, captured and exiled the northern kingdom in approximately 740 to 722 BC. Babylon gained power and conquered Assyria. Then she attacked, captured and exiled the southern kingdom of Judah in approximately 597 to 581 BC. [The dates for both the northern and southern kingdom’s exiles are approximate.]

In these circumstances, God began to send prophets to call his people, both Israel and Judah, back to himself and to faithfulness to him. Both the prophet’s spoken messages and writings contain the messages

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God used them to proclaim his presence and will for his people. In his messages, he promises a future king from David's descendants. He also promised to prepare the way for the coming of this king. When you open the pages of the New Testament Israel is again occupied and ruled over by a foreign power, i.e., the Roman Empire.

Additionally, as you prepare to dig into Matthew 3:1-12, the condition of the roads in ancient Israel was not always good for travel. There were no paved roads like we have today. Therefore, when it rained, sometimes these ancient roads washed out, making them difficult to travel along. Therefore, when a king planned to visit a city, he would sometimes send an advance party to prepare the way, path or road and making them as straight and level as possible. It was this advanced party's responsibility to make sure the roads into that city were properly repaired so that the King would not be prevented from entering due to the poor condition of the road.

It is this image of the condition of roads in ancient Israel that Old Testament prophets used in predicting how God would prepare people for the coming of His anointed King. They predicted that God would send a person, like a king's advanced party, who would prepare the way for His King. God also promised to anoint this king and use him to establish his kingdom or governing upon the earth.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE: to uncover and identify how people in the Gospel of Matthew were prepared to enter the Kingdom of God and become disciples of Jesus and determine its applicability for us today.

LEARNING METHOD: Answering the basic "inductive" questions: What does it say? What does it mean? What does it press upon you to do?

INSTRUCTION 1: What does the passage say? Dig into the facts in Matthew 3:1-12 and answer the very basic questions that follow.

1. Who is the main person in these verses?
2. Where is he and what is he doing?
3. What is his main message and command?
4. From which OT prophet does Matthew say why he is commanding people to do this?

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5. According to this prophet, what are this future person's main purpose, function and role in the kingdom of heaven?
6. What was this person's clothing and diet?
7. From what places did people come out to him?
8. What does Matthew say that the people did in response to his message?
9. In response to what the people did, what did he do and where did he do this?
10. When the Pharisees and Sadducees also came out to him, what did he call them and what did he require them to do before he would agree to baptize them?
 - a. What did "vipers" do to people in ancient Israel?
 - b. Therefore, what do you suspect made them like "vipers"?
11. What does he indicate that they thought about themselves that led them to conclude that they had no need to do what he required?
12. In the kingdom of heaven, what does he say must be produced?
 - a. From what source does John say God can raise up children for Abraham?
 - b. What does John say the ax is doing?
 - c. If this is done with an ax, what happens to the tree?
13. How does he describe his baptism with the baptism of the person who is coming after him?

INSTRUCTION 2: What does the passage mean? Read and dig into Matthew 3:1-12 and answer the following questions.

1. What specific things does John do in this passage to prepare people to enter the Kingdom of Heaven?
 - a. 3:2a _____
 - b. 3:2b [John calls people to=] _____
 - c. 3:6a [guides people in =] _____
 - d. 3:6b _____ [them as a visible sign that God has forgiven them.]
 - e. 3:8 calling people to _____

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2. From your list above, what are the specific “fruit in keeping with repentance” that the people John was baptizing were producing?
3. What does John say God will do to those who do not produce this “fruit”?

INSTRUCTION 3: What does the passage press you to do? Dig into your personal experiences, reflect upon and answer questions that follow.

1. How do you think that producing this specific fruit prepared people to become disciples, students, pupils and learners in the kingdom of heaven?
2. What pressed and prepared you to produce this specific fruit in your own life?
3. Have you ever helped or even personally challenge or guided someone else to produce this fruit in their lives? Why or why not?
4. Should the opportunity present itself, are you willing in the future to help and even personally guide someone else to produce this fruit of the kingdom of heaven?

INSTRUCTION 4: To discuss with others.

1. What have you discovered for yourself in this bite of God’s Word?
2. To you, what is the most interesting thing in this passage for being prepared to live as a citizen in the kingdom of heaven?
3. Did anything in this bite of Scripture pierce and penetrate your heart? If so, is it something you can share with others?
4. Was there anything difficult or troubling in this passage for you? If so, what is it?
5. What are you now committed or more committed to do because of what you have discovered for yourself in this passage?
6. If someone asked you about being prepared for God’s kingdom, what would you tell him or her?
7. Finally, according to Matthew, for whom is all this preparation work being done?