

*The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 8 January 2023. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.*

## **The First Baptist Preacher**

### **Matthew 3:1-6**

Probably every one of you in this room can point to at least one event in your lifetime that was a “game-changer”—an event which, you knew deep down inside, would change the course of history. For example, many of us remember when the Berlin Wall fell. When that happened, we knew that history was about to take a very different turn. Many of us remember the horror of 9-11; and we knew, when it happened, that things would never be the same again. Of course, all of us have seen how the Covid pandemic has changed the world. We can see how this event is being used to accelerate the creation of a one-world government. Yuval Noah Harari, a huge promoter of transhumanism, recently said, “People could look back in 100 years and identify the coronavirus epidemic as the moment when a new regime of surveillance took over—especially surveillance *under the skin*.” (It sounds as though he might be hinting at a future time when an electronic mark will be placed “*in*” people’s hands or foreheads, doesn’t it?) Of course, there are many elderly saints who can remember the creation of the state of Israel on 17 May 1948. When Christians heard that the nation of Israel had been revived in one day, they knew that the time of Israel’s regathering, and of the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, was very near.

Yet, what is the biggest “game-changer” in the last 2,000 years? As Christians, we know that it is the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection is the biggest game-changer in history! On that day, the fountain of salvation was opened to all mankind, and Satan was defeated! However, there was a “game-changer” that happened only three years prior to Jesus’ resurrection; and, though not as earth-shaking, it was profound! It wasn’t a huge, tragic event; and it didn’t involve the movement of armies, or the uprising of nations. It was simply a day when a strange-looking man stood up in the wilderness of Judaea, opened his mouth, and began to preach these simple words: “***Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.***” This man was the first Baptist preacher in history; and the message that he preached changed the world. His ministry marked the beginning of a new era. Because of this man, many people’s hearts were prepared to believe on the King of Israel; and many were snatched from the flames of hell. His name was **John the Baptist**.

This morning, we will examine John’s life and work; and we will see how the message that he preached still demands a response from *us* today. If you do not know Christ as your personal Saviour, John is still crying to you, “***Repent!***” He is still crying, “***Flee from the wrath to come.***” He is still crying, “***Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.***” If you know Christ as your Saviour already, but have not yet been scripturally baptised, John is crying out to you, “***Be baptised!***” This morning, we will examine both these aspects of John’s message, and apply them to our lives. The title of this message is “***The First Baptist Preacher.***”

**Read Matthew 3:1-6.**

#### **I. The Baptist’s résumé (vv. 1, 3)**

In the last part of **chapter 2**, Matthew tells us, very briefly, about Jesus’ growing-up years. He says that after Jesus had returned from Egypt with Mary and Joseph, He grew up in the town of Nazareth. Apart from this, Matthew doesn’t tell us anything else about Jesus’ childhood. **Luke** recorded *one* event from when Jesus was twelve years old (the time when

Jesus amazed the rabbis in Jerusalem with His knowledge of Scripture); but Matthew doesn't mention that event. He has already made the point that Jesus was *born* King of the Jews; and now, he fast-forwards 30 years, to the day when John the Baptist stood up and began to proclaim to the people of Israel that their *King* had arrived, and that the Kingdom was at hand.

Now, who *was* John, exactly? The Bible says that he was the forerunner of the Messiah. God gave John a very special task—the task of preparing people's hearts to believe on Jesus. He seemed to arise from out of nowhere; yet, he wasn't some self-appointed prophet. *God* appointed John; and He foretold of John's ministry hundreds of years before he was born. One of the passages that foretold of John's ministry is mentioned here in **verse 3. (Read verse 3 again.)** In this verse, Matthew is quoting from **Isaiah**. Let's look at that Scripture.

### **Read Isaiah 40:3-5.**

Folks, do you realise how profound this verse is? If John the Baptist was that "*voice crying in the wilderness,*" and if his whole mission was to point people to Jesus, it means that John was calling Jesus *God*. In this verse, John is crying, "*Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*" John's whole message was that *God Himself* was now literally walking among them, in the deserts of Galilee, and that they needed to prepare their hearts to receive Him, because very soon, He would be revealed for all to see.

**Now, think about that.** If God be invisible, how could the people "see" their God in the desert? There is only one way: *God* had to become a *Man*. Jesus is both God and Man; and because He was a Man, people were able to behold Him! By the way, **verses 4 and 5** have not been fulfilled yet. Not *every* eye has seen Jesus *yet*. This **Isaiah** prophecy blends Jesus' *first* coming with His *second* coming (and doesn't inform us about the big gap of time between the two). When Christ returns to earth in power and glory one day, literally *all flesh—every eye—*will see Him. However, when Jesus came the *first* time, He appeared quietly, in the deserts of Galilee; and John the Baptist was there, preparing the people to receive Him.

Now, let's examine John's credentials. How do we know that John was Jesus' forerunner? Simply because *John* said so? No! John didn't suddenly wake up one day and think, "You know, I think I might be that 'Voice crying in the wilderness.'" No, God informed John's parents, before he was born, that their son would be that "*voice*"; and He used miraculous events to confirm to *everyone around them* that their son was no ordinary child!

### **Read Luke 1:5-20, 24, 39-45.**

As you can see, the first Baptist preacher in history was a unique man! Now, make no mistake about it: John was a sinner, like everyone else; and like everyone else, he had to repent of his sin, and believe on the Messiah, to be saved. Nonetheless, John was filled with the Holy Spirit from birth. No other sinner in history ever had that privilege! This doesn't mean that John was *saved* from birth; it simply means that the Holy Spirit was protecting Him in a very unique way, because he had a very special job for Him. Even in the womb, when John had no understanding of good or evil, he leapt for joy when he came into the presence of his cousin, Jesus of Nazareth (who was in the womb of *His* mother)!

John's mission was clear: he was to be another Elijah! John never did any miracles, as Elijah did; but he laboured in the same *spirit and power* that Elijah did. The "*Spirit*" that empowered John was the same "*Spirit*" that had empowered Elijah. John was so filled with the Spirit, that he was like a burning and shining light. *Everyone* knew that he was a prophet; and when he claimed to be the "*voice crying in the wilderness,*" people believed it! His job was to prepare people's *hearts* to receive the Messiah, by preaching to them the Gospel of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As his father Zacharias put it, "*And thou, child, shalt*

*be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; to give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins.”*

#### **Read Malachi 4:5-6.**

Are you beginning to see how important John’s mission was? Though Israel had the Scriptures, most of them were still in spiritual darkness, because they were trying to get to God by their own righteousness. God’s curse was hanging over them. They needed to hear the message that their sin had separated them from God, and that they must *repent of their sin* in order to enter the coming Kingdom of Messiah. How could they receive their Messiah if their hearts were still cold, dark, and sinful? God cannot accept us in our sin! There had to be an inner transformation—a transformation that would reconcile them not only to God, but to *each other*! God foretold that through John’s preaching, the hearts of sons and fathers would be turned toward each other. That is what the preaching of the *Gospel* does. It transforms families that are broken and hurting, because it changes people’s hearts from the inside out. The Gospel, when it is believed in the heart, takes away our ugly sin and selfishness, and makes us new creations, and makes us at peace with each other.

Now, not only did John’s preaching prepare the people’s hearts for the Messiah: it also marked the *end* of the Old Testament era, and the beginning of the New Testament era. Contrary to what many people have been taught, the church age did *not* begin on the Pentecost after Jesus’ resurrection: it began with the preaching and baptising of John the Baptist.

#### **Read Matthew 11:7-14.**

Jesus couldn’t have stated it more clearly: ***“All the prophets and the law prophesied until John.”*** In other words, the Old Testament age (the era of the Law and prophets) ended when John began to preach. The *Gospel* era was now here! The Bible says in **Mark 1:1**, ***“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”***; and immediately, Mark begins to tell about the ministry of John the Baptist. The *Gospel* message (the message of salvation through Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection) was proclaimed from the very beginning of John’s ministry. The New Covenant, which God had promised to Israel in **Jeremiah 31**, was now being presented to Israel through John’s preaching.

#### **Read Malachi 3:1.**

Let’s look carefully at this verse. First, who is the first ***“messenger”*** mentioned in this verse? It is John the Baptist. John is the ***“messenger”*** who was sent to prepare the way before the Messiah. Now, who is the second ***“messenger”*** in this verse? Let’s read it again. (**Read verse 1 again.**) The second ***“messenger”*** in this verse (the one who is called the ***“messenger of the covenant”***) is the Lord Jesus Christ! He is the one who came to establish the **New Covenant** with Israel, by shedding His blood for our sins on the cross. And who is the messenger who prepared the way for Christ and His New Covenant? John the Baptist!

Brethren, you cannot separate John the Baptist’s ministry from Jesus’ New Covenant. That is why the New Covenant age began with John the Baptist’s ministry. Jesus is the Messenger of the New Covenant; but John was the messenger who *pointed* people to *Him*! John’s whole mission was to point people to the Messenger of the New Covenant! Every time John baptised someone, Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection (which is the *foundation* of the New Covenant) was being pictured. Though the Old Covenant, with its sacrifices and feasts, was still outwardly in operation, the New Covenant age had truly begun; and as the years went by, God weaned Jewish believers *away* from the Old Covenant regulations little by little. The New Testament era had now begun; and it began with John the Baptist!

## II. The Baptist's raiment and rations (v. 4)

**(Read verse 4 again.)** In every way, John was a unique and unusual man. The inner power of the Holy Spirit was strikingly obvious in his life. However, even his *outward* manners, dress, and diet, made him stand out. For one thing, John was a Nazarite from birth. He wasn't a "Nazarene" (a citizen of Nazareth), as Jesus was; rather, he was a "Nazarite" (someone who had taken a Nazarite vow). Let's go back to the Old Testament, and examine that vow.

### Read Numbers 6:1-8.

What was the purpose of the Nazarite vow? What was the point of abstaining from grape products, and of leaving your hair uncut, and of not touching a dead body? Did the keeping of these disciplines make you more "spiritual"? No. No discipline can save a person's soul, nor make a believer right with God. (Samson was a Nazarite; but for most of his life, he was *very* out of fellowship with God!) What the Nazarite vow *did* do was to *remind* the person, day after day, that he was consecrated to God. Not touching dead bodies was a living illustration, and reminder, that they were to abstain from the defilements of sin. Not partaking of enjoyments such as grapes, and not even taking time to cut their hair, helped them to stay focused on spiritual things, such as praying and studying God's law. Every time John felt the weight of those heavy dreadlocks on his head, he was reminded of his mission.

You know, there's something about denying yourself of *bodily* enjoyments from time to time that makes you more prone to stay *spiritually* disciplined, too. If you can't control what you put into your mouth, it's likely that you will also have trouble with refraining from taking in *spiritual* defilements. If you are obsessed with physical comfort and pleasure, you will struggle spiritually, because walking with God is *not* always comfortable! That is why Paul said, **"But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection."** It's the same way with fasting (which John practiced often, as well). Fasting doesn't earn you favour with God, or *make* you spiritual; but it does remind you, every time your stomach growls, that you need to take time to pray! It is a way of stripping your soul bare before God, so that you are reminded of your absolute need of Him!

Now, not only was John a Nazarite, but he voluntarily lived a very simple life. As a Nazarite, he was permitted to eat the things that other Jews ate (except grapes); yet, he chose to eat locusts and wild honey. Locusts were one of the few insects that Jews were allowed to eat in their kosher diet. In **Leviticus 11:22**, God told the people of Israel that they could eat **"the locust after his kind, and the bald locust after his kind, and the beetle after his kind, and the grasshopper after his kind."** Locusts were perfectly acceptable to eat; yet, it was a poor man's food—the food of desert Bedouins. (It is still the food of Bedouins to this day!) As for his clothing, John didn't wear comfortable or fancy clothes. He wore camel's skins, and a leather girdle, just as the prophet Elijah did. As for his residence, it was under the open sky. For most of his adult life, he had lived in the desert. What was he doing all those years, as he lived such a simple, harsh, hand-to-mouth existence? He was preparing for that short, but powerful, ministry that God was going to give him. He was learning to walk in the Spirit of God, and to allow the Spirit to control him completely! Jesus fasted in the wilderness for 40 days, because He had to prepare Himself for the awesome responsibility that lay before Him. The fate of all mankind, and their salvation from sin, death, and hell, depended upon His faithfulness to His Father's mission; and He had to be ready! In the same way, John had to prepare for *his* awesome mission. The hearts of the people of Israel *had* to be prepared to believe on Jesus; and John was the man that God chose for the job.

Now, of course, the Nazarite vow and the *kosher* diet are not in operation anymore: however, I believe that there is much we can learn from John's lifestyle. The Bible says, **"And having food and raiment, let us be therewith content."** We have only a short time on this earth; and the enjoyments of this life, harmless though they may be in and of themselves, can prevent us

from doing what God has commissioned us to do, if we *love them* instead of loving God. Christian, love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength!

### III. The Baptist's report (vv. 1-2, 5-6)

(Read Matthew 3:1-2 again.) In verse 1, Matthew says that John came "*preaching*." That word "*preaching*" comes from the word *kerusso*, which means "**to herald, or publish an event.**" What was the soon-coming event that John was announcing? The arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven! In a few moments, we will talk about exactly what "*the kingdom of heaven*" is. First, though, we need to talk about the *requirement* for entering the Kingdom of Heaven. The requirement is that you must "*repent*"!

Now, "*Repent*" is certainly not a popular word. When I am preaching on the street, people often scowl, or put their hands over their ears, or turn their heads away and thrust their palm toward me in a gesture of disdain, when they hear that word "*repent*." Yet, John said that in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, you *must* repent! I think we'd better find out what it means to "repent," don't you? What *does* it mean? Does it mean to "do penance," as many of us were taught? If you look in the Catholic Douay Reims Version, that is exactly how it is translated. But are "repentance" and "doing penance" the same thing? No, they aren't!

"What's the difference," you say? It's the difference between Heaven and hell! The Greek word for "*repent*" literally means "to think afterwards." It means "to think differently," "to reconsider," or "to change one's mind." It means to change your mind concerning your sin. It means to agree with God that your sin has earned you hell, and that you can't save yourself. It means to abandon your own worthless self-righteousness, and to turn to the Lord Jesus Christ for mercy and forgiveness. A good illustration of repentance can be found in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. Remember what the prodigal son said when he "came to himself," and realised how wicked and wretched he was? He said, "***I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee.***" That is what repentance is: turning to God, from sin. Along with this "repentance," there must also be faith—trust, or dependence, on Jesus Christ alone to save you. Faith and repentance cannot be separated. They are like two sides of the same coin. You cannot have the one without the other. Faith, accompanied by true repentance of mind and heart, is the requirement for receiving God's gift of salvation. Jesus Himself said, "***The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.***"

Now, if repentance means "a turning of the heart, mind, and will to God from sin," then what does "penance" mean? It is the false idea that you must *punish yourself* in some way in order to *earn* merit with God, and to atone for your sins. Now, ironically, "penance" is based on the Latin word *paeniteo*, which means to "repent," or to "change one's mind." There is nothing wrong with the word *paeniteo*, when it is defined correctly. The problem is that many religions have *redefined* this word to include the idea of *punishing yourself* in order to atone for your sins. The words "**do** penance" say it all. That word "do" implies that it is an outward work. The footnote in the Catholic Douay-Rheims Bible explains that penance means "repentance and amendment of life, but also **punishing past sins by fasting, and such like penitential exercises.**"

My friends, nothing could be further from the truth! We cannot atone for our own sins by punishing ourselves. *Christ* took our punishment *for us*! *He* made atonement for *all* our sins, *one* time on the cross. He is our Sin-Bearer! Salvation is received by simply believing on the Son of God, and repenting of your sin. Repentance (turning of the mind, heart, and will toward God) always goes along with *faith* in the one who *took your punishment in your place*. If you are trying to do some kind of work to *punish* yourself for your sins, or to *atone* for your sins, you are trying to add a work of your own to the work that Jesus already did *for you*; and God will not accept it. The Bible says, "***For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that***

*not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.” Titus 3:5 says, “**Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us.**” If you are trying to get into Heaven through your good works, you are still lost in your sin. Come to Jesus in simple faith and repentance of heart, and He will save you today!*

Now, what do you gain when you repent and believe on the Son of God? The Kingdom! John said: “**Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.**” Yet, what *is* the “Kingdom”? That is a loaded question; and we will be addressing it *a lot* as we study through **Matthew!** For now, though, I will explain it very simply, and clearly. When Jesus talked about the coming “Kingdom,” there were two kinds of Kingdoms that He meant: and He used very precise words to describe each of them. First, there is the “**Kingdom of God.**” The Kingdom of God is invisible and spiritual. You cannot see it with your eyes. It is made up of all who have been born again, and who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The *only* way you can enter this Kingdom is by placing your trust in Jesus. The moment you trust in Him, the Holy Spirit comes to live inside you; and you become a member of the Kingdom of God. This is the Kingdom that Jesus was talking about when He told Nicodemus, “**Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.**”

Secondly, there is the “**Kingdom of Heaven.**” The Kingdom of Heaven is a physical, visible Kingdom, which Christ will establish on earth one day, when He returns. When Christ descends to earth at the Battle of Armageddon, He will destroy all the kingdoms of this world; He will slay the Antichrist, and all his followers; and He will physically sit on a throne in Jerusalem for 1,000 years, and rule over the whole world. This earthly Kingdom is called “The Kingdom of Heaven” because it will literally come down from Heaven. Christ and His resurrected saints (and all the angels) will come down from Heaven to earth to establish it! But here’s the thing: *no one* except saved people will be allowed to enter that Kingdom. Only those who belong to the spiritual *Kingdom of God* (those who are born again, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit) will be allowed to enter into the *physical, earthly* Kingdom of Heaven. The door will be shut to all who did not receive Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour, while the door was still open to them. Jesus said, “**Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able. When once the master of the house is risen up, and hath shut to the door, and ye begin to stand without, and to knock at the door, saying, Lord, Lord, open unto us; and he shall answer and say unto you, I know you not whence ye are: ... There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out.**” My friends, the Kingdom of Heaven was promised to the nation of Israel; and during the Kingdom age, Israel *will* be exalted above all nations. However, people of *all* nations, both Jew and Gentile, will enter this Kingdom, on one condition: that they repent of their sin, and believe on the Son of God. Are *you* ready to enter the Kingdom?

Now, perhaps some of you are wondering, “Why did **John** say that the **Kingdom of Heaven** was ‘at hand’? It’s been 2,000 years now, and the Kingdom still hasn’t arrived; so, how was it “near”? The answer to that question is, “Yes, the Kingdom of Heaven *was* near, and it *could* have been established a long time ago—if Israel, as a nation, had repented and believed on Jesus. Because they rejected Him, the Kingdom of Heaven has been put ‘on hold’; but one day, it *will* come, when Israel, as a nation, finally believes on Jesus as their Messiah!”

You may also be wondering, “Why did **Jesus** say that “The **Kingdom of God** is at hand?” If the Kingdom of God is made up of Spirit-indwelt believers, was Jesus saying that believers *weren’t* indwelt by the Holy Spirit yet? The answer is, “Yes, that *is* what He was saying!” The Holy Spirit did *not* indwell believers when Jesus was on earth; but today, He does. After Jesus returned to Heaven, He sent the Holy Spirit to indwell His followers; and today, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell inside *every* believer at the moment he is saved! If you have been saved, the Holy Spirit is living inside you right now, and you are a member of the Kingdom of

God. We will be talking about these things in much more depth as we study through **Matthew**.

However, there is one more thing we need to talk about before we close today: and that is the second part of John's message. The first part of his message is that sinners need to repent of their sin and be saved, so that they may enter the Kingdom. The second part is that believers need to be **baptised** after they are saved! (**Read Matthew 3:5-6 again.**)

My friends, let me be extremely clear: being baptised doesn't wash away anyone's sins! Salvation is received by *repentance of heart, and faith in Christ alone*. Baptism is simply a first step of obedience to God *after* you are saved. However, it is an extremely important step! Baptism is what publicly identifies you with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. When you go down under the water, and come back up, you are declaring to the world that you are trusting in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus to save you. You are also declaring that *you* have "died" to sin, and are risen again to a new life in Christ. Baptism also brings you into the fellowship of a local church, so that you can take the Lord's Supper, vote on church matters, and serve the Lord together with fellow believers.

**Read Romans 6:3-6.**

**Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-13.**

Baptism is extremely important, brethren. Baptism has been the practice of Christ's churches from the very beginning of John the Baptist's ministry. The first church was planted in the wilderness of Judaea, when people began to believe John's message, and to receive his baptism as a sign of their faith in Jesus. The baptism that John practiced was not a "different" kind of baptism from what we have today. It was not, as the "scholars" say, a modified version of Jewish "washing" ceremonies. Nor was it some ritual that John learned from the Essene cult when he was out in the desert. (John was *not* an Essene!) No, John's baptism came from Heaven: and Jesus Himself said so. The church was certainly in its *infancy* during John's and Jesus' ministries; but it existed, nonetheless: and Jesus promised that He would continue to build His church. Repentance and faith in Jesus, followed by water baptism, were the requirements for becoming a member of it. Every time a new believer publicly confessed his sins, and was baptised, he became a member of Christ's church. That new believer, through his baptism, was also picturing the future death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Today, when we baptise someone, we are looking *back* to Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection; yet, it is still the same baptism that John administered, and that Jesus and His disciples administered. Baptism was new, and profound. Everyone who witnessed John's baptism knew, instinctively, that a new era had begun. This brings us to our last Scripture.

**Read John 1:19-29.**

Why were the priests so concerned about the baptism that John was doing? Why did they come all the way from Jerusalem to ask about it? Because no prophet had ever administered baptism before. The fact that John, who was obviously a mighty prophet of God, was doing something completely new and powerful, seemed to indicate that they had entered into a new era of history. That is, in fact, *exactly* what was happening. John's baptism was the "writing on the wall." Everything they'd ever known was soon going to fade away, because they had now entered a new age. And what is God's mandate in this age? His mandate is that we believe the Gospel, and be saved; that we receive baptism, and thus join a Bible-preaching church; that we observe all things that He has commanded us; and that we preach the Gospel to the lost, and establish churches, until He returns. Christian, are *you* being obedient to that mandate? If you haven't received baptism, there is a big part of Christ's mandate that you are not heeding. Receive believer's baptism, so that you can serve God the way that He intends!

**Conclusion:** As we close this morning, I would like to reach out, once again, to those of you who may not be saved. Please hear what John the Baptist says. In **John 3:36** John the Baptist said, ***“He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.”*** God’s holy nature demands that sin be punished; and if you will not accept the punishment that Jesus took *for* you on the cross, then you yourself must receive the punishment for your sin, in the Lake of Fire. Please don’t let that happen! Don’t let pride hold you back from salvation. Don’t worry about what others may think. Come to Jesus today, and believe on Him. He is ready to receive you!