



# *The King's Ransom*

Matthew 20:28

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Text  
Matthew 3:1-12

Topic  
Jews from all over the region flock to the desert to hear a person who calls himself the voice of one crying in the wilderness

Title  
*"I've Been to the Desert to the Voice with No Name"*

## Introduction

Moshe Basson is the head chef at an acclaimed kosher restaurant in Israel. When he heard that millions of locusts were swarming across the border from Egypt his first thought was not of agricultural devastation wrought by the marauding insects – it was of a nice locust risotto with coriander seeds and a pinch of chili.

I doubt that John the Baptist was cooking gourmet locusts while he was out in the Judean wilderness. And, anyway, it's not the **meal** of John we are most interested in; it's the **message**.

He appeared suddenly urging the people to "Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand."

"Repent" is a word we don't hear often enough, but that needs to change. It needs to change because it wasn't just the keynote of this strange wilderness preacher. It was the keynote of Jesus' message and that of the apostles. It must, therefore, be a keynote in any and all Gospel preaching.

I'll organize my thoughts about John and repentance around two points: #1 While You Remain In The Wilderness Anticipating The Kingdom Your Repentance Should Be Ongoing, and #2 While You Remain In The Wilderness Anticipating The Kingdom Your Repentance Should Be Outgoing.

#1 While You Remain In The Wilderness Anticipating The Kingdom Your Repentance Should Be Ongoing  
(v1-6)

If I had been a first century Jew, I would have been waiting to hear the announcement, "**Rejoice**, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand."

By using the word "repent" John was telling the Jews they were not ready for their King or for His kingdom. Before they could rejoice they must repent.

Mat 3:1 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,

Matthew jumps ahead some thirty years after the events of Jesus' early childhood. Matthew's Jewish readers apparently knew the background of John since he gives none of it.

His birth was announced by the angel Gabriel to his father, Zacharias, while he was serving as a priest in the Temple. His mother, Elizabeth, was related to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Because Zacharias did not believe Gabriel's announcement, he was struck dumb until the child was born and he named him at his circumcision.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that he was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb (1:15). In that same verse we are told that he drank no alcohol, causing some commentators to say he obeyed the prohibitions of the Old Testament Nazarite vow.

John was in the "wilderness," which becomes a symbol of the true spiritual condition of the Jews. While they may have wanted to wait along the road to Jerusalem with palm branches to shout "Hosanna!" to welcome their King, a trip to the wilderness was the prerequisite.

Mat 3:2 and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

"Repent" itself is from words translated *after* and *mind*. It thus comes to mean *a new mind, or a new way of thinking*. We most commonly say it means *to change your mind*.

Change your mind about what? About your relationship to God. You change your mind about sin, God, and yourself. Sin is recognized as personal guilt; God as the One who demands perfect righteousness; and self is recognized as defiled and helpless.

Jesus put repentance into perspective when He said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Luke 5:31-32).

To repent is to own my true spiritual condition before God. Just as a sick person owns his condition and need for a physician, I must own that I am hopelessly sinful and selfish and need a Savior.

"Evangelical repentance is a godly sorrow wrought in the heart of a sinful person by the Word and Spirit of God, whereby from a sense of his sin, as offensive to God, and defiling and endangering his own soul, and from an apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, he with grief and hatred of all his known sins, turns then to God as his Savior and Lord" (Watson).

God is the author of our repentance, but He does not repent for us. He gives, or grants, repentance in the sense of making repentance possible. As one creed puts it, "The Spirit of God gives to all who will repent the gracious help of penitence of heart and hope in mercy, that they may believe unto pardon and spiritual life."

What is the "kingdom of Heaven?" First of all, it is the same as the "kingdom of God." Matthew chose the word "Heaven" because he was writing mostly to a Jewish audience and Jews do not like to utter the name of God.

He will mention the kingdom of Heaven thirty-two times in his Gospel. Taking all those references into account, as well as the teaching of the entire Bible, this is what is meant by the kingdom:

1. The Old Testament promised that a descendant of King David would rule over a literal kingdom on the earth.
2. When the King was physically on the earth, in the person of Jesus Christ, the kingdom was described as "present," or "at hand."
3. When Jesus was rejected by His own people, the promise of the literal kingdom on the earth was postponed. In the mean time, His subjects obey Him while the world continues in rebellion.
4. The King will return in what is called the Second Coming and He will, in fact, establish the long awaited, postponed, kingdom of God on the earth.

Mat 3:3 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.' "

It's a verse in Isaiah that is in a section of that book which describes the coming of the Jewish Messiah to establish the kingdom of God on the earth.

The word "straight" is insightful. The Jews would have understood it to mean a *measuring rod* more than just clearing away debris on the road. John was reminding them that God was the measuring rod, that God was the standard, they must compare themselves to. His righteousness was what they must live up to - and no one can. All fall short.

Mat 3:4 Now John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.

His clothing was reminiscent of the Old Testament prophet, Elijah. It was significant because, in the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, there is a promise that Elijah will come first to announce the arrival of the King. After that revelation by Malachi there was silence, as far as a prophecy is concerned, for about 400 years, until John broke it in the spirit and power of Elijah announcing the kingdom.

His diet, coupled with the other clues about his lifestyle we get elsewhere, let us know he meant business. He was focused on his task and didn't let the world, or his being in the world, distract him.

I should mention there are some who think "locusts" is referring not to the insects but, rather, to the locust tree which produces an edible fruit. I say they are just being squeamish.

Mat 3:5 Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him

Mat 3:6 and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.

The Jews practiced all sorts of ceremonial washings, but baptism by immersion was reserved for Gentiles who wanted to convert to Judaism. A Gentile convert was called a *proselyte* and had to first be circumcised (if male), then baptized in the presence of three witnesses, then bring a sacrifice in the Temple.

For a Jew to undergo baptism it was saying they were no better off than unbelieving Gentiles. They were exactly on the same level, spiritually speaking, as Publicans and sinners. Their heritage and rituals were meaningless.

It was maybe the most unpopular message ever. Yet "all" flocked to John - not just to hear him, but to concede he was correct and submit to baptism. One commentator estimates he might have baptized upwards of 200,000 Jews.

Again I'll make the contrast: Expecting to *Rejoice!*, the Jews were commanded to *Repent!* They were called upon to be baptized, as if they were converting for the first time. It was humbling, yet many thousands submitted to it.

John preached repentance. Jesus preached repentance. His twelve apostles preached repentance. It was the theme of Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost. Repentance was at the heart of the apostle Paul's preaching of the Gospel. It remains a command to be preached by disciples to all men everywhere.

Here is something for us who have "repented," as it were, and are saved. **Repentance is ongoing; it never stops.**

When Martin Luther discovered that biblical repentance meant a change of mind rather than "doing penance," it changed his whole outlook on salvation, and was one of the chief factors in ushering in the Reformation. In his famous Ninety-five Theses, which mark the beginning of the Reformation, Martin Luther declared that the **entire life of a Christian is to be characterized by repentance.**

That doesn't mean you're not saved or forgiven; it means you are to continually become more and more aware of sin in its subtleties and change your mind about it.

To a seemingly vibrant first century church, the church at Ephesus, Jesus said, "Repent!" In their case, they had left their first love and needed to check their relationship to Him.

The apostle Paul, late in his walk with Jesus, could acknowledge he was chief among sinners. The apostle John reminded us that if we say we do not sin, we are liars.

As long as we are living in this wilderness, while the kingdom is postponed, we will need to constantly be changing our minds about sin and self and our Savior - growing more, not less, sensitive to sin's subtleties.

No man can truly believe in Christ, who does not first repent. Nor will his repentance end when he has saving faith, but the more he knows God as he goes on through the years, the deeper will that repentance become. A servant of Christ said: "I repented before I knew the meaning of the word. I have repented far more since I did then."

Have you? Have I? That's the question we must ask and answer.

## #2 While You Remain In The Wilderness Anticipating The Kingdom Your Repentance Should Be Outgoing (v7-12)

By "outgoing" I mean to say you and I are the current voices on the earth, in this wilderness of sin and self and Satan, who are to command all men everywhere to Repent!

Mat 3:7 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?"

The Pharisees were ritualists. The Sadducees were rationalists. They both saw themselves as righteous before God and in no need of repentance.



Why come out to John? Well, many thousands of Jews were being affected by his preaching and that was not something they were happy about. They were either being hypocritical, acting like they acknowledged John so as to remain popular with the people. Or they were looking for something to criticize him for.

I'm told that the Pharisees began as a separatist movement during the time of Malachi. They began well - described positively by Malachi as those who were seeking The Lord. Four hundred years later they had fallen into ritual religion and were in need of repentance. Let it serve as a warning to us. Anyone can start well; how are we at the finish?

I mentioned the church at Ephesus. They needed to repent after only a few years of existence.

The main "viper" in the Bible is the devil. In a moment John will make a reference to "sons of Abraham." It tells us that these guys probably played the Abraham card, saying they didn't need baptism since they were descendants of Abraham and, in their minds, automatically on their way to Heaven. Nope. They were of their dad, the devil.

Happy Fathers Day, Pharisees and Sadducees!

Mat 3:8 Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance,

Repentance is not a work. It's not a turning away from sin. But if you repent, if you change your mind about sin, self, and the Savior, it *will* manifest itself in a change of behavior in which you do, in fact, turn away from sin and instead bear spiritual fruit.

Mat 3:9 and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.

Abraham has three types of descendants:

1. He has physical descendants, all of which are ethnic Jews.
2. He has, among the Jews, spiritual descendants, those Jews who have repented and are saved.
3. He further has among Gentiles spiritual descendants, anyone who has repented and is saved.

Simply being born a Jew cannot save you. You must be born again, born spiritually, by grace through repentance and faith.

I thought it was just by faith? Repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin. Repentance is a condition of the heart necessary before we can exercise saving faith. True repentance never exists apart from faith. You cannot turn from sin without turning to God. But, conversely, true faith never exists without repentance.

Why do we not mention repentance more? I think it's because we are afraid it will come across as a work we must do in order to be saved. When people hear the word "repent" they think they must stop sinning, get their life together, in order to qualify for salvation. So we tell people to believe knowing that if they do, they will repent since the two go together.

Dr. H.A. Ironside once said,

Undoubtedly one great reason why some earnest Gospel preachers are almost afraid of, and generally ignore, the terms "repent" and "repentance" in their evangelizing is that they fear lest their hearers misunderstand these terms and think of them as implying something meritorious on the part of the sinner. But nothing could be wider of the mark. There is no saving merit in owning my true condition. There is no healing in acknowledging the nature of my illness. And repentance... is just this very thing.

To only emphasize believing is to water down the Gospel. John and Jesus and the apostles after them commanded men to repent and believe. So must we.

Mat 3:10 And even now the ax 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.

The Pharisees especially prided themselves on keeping all the Law. Sadducees, since they were among the elite in Jewish society, could claim God must be blessing them in light of their prosperity.

John said neither had any real spiritual fruit and that they were in fact like dead trees which needed to be removed to make room for fruitful ones.

In other words, they were not going to enter the kingdom but, quite the opposite, would be cast into the fire.

Mat 3:11 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.

Mat 3:12 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."

Subjected as they were to the Roman Empire, the Jews couldn't help but think that their King would come and free them to be a sovereign nation once again. John was giving them insight into a more important aspect of the kingdom - the spiritual aspect.

When their King came He would first identify His true subjects. This John compared to the common process of winnowing wheat to separate it from the useless chaff. Wheat was gathered in to the barn while the leftover chaff was burned.

Only those who had repented would be gathered in to the kingdom. The rest, well, they would be burned.

Using the imagery of immersion baptism, John said there were two possibilities:

1. You could be baptized with the Holy Spirit - be saved.
2. You could be baptized with fire - be lost and left to suffer for eternity.

If you want to identify these things more precisely, the baptism with the Holy Spirit was the prophecy in the Old Testament book of Joel that would be fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost. The baptism with fire is, ultimately, the final, future judgment of sinners to an eternity separated from God.

The message hasn't changed. Jesus is coming and, when He does, He will separate believers from nonbelievers. The kingdom of Heaven He establishes on the earth for a thousand years will be a believers-only thing at first. Nonbelievers will be separated out and consigned to suffering to await their final disposition in the Lake of Fire for all eternity.

**We** are called upon to tell all men everywhere to repent and believe.

- John said "**Repent!**"
- The opening line of Jesus' first preaching were, "**Repent**, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17).
- To Jews, Peter declared, "**Repent**, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).
- To Gentiles, Paul declared, "[God] now commands all men everywhere to **repent**, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31).

In Mark 1:15 Jesus preached, "Repent, and believe in the Gospel."

We are the voice in the wilderness. We are to be outgoing or, if you prefer, going out with the Gospel of repentance and faith. We are to command men, or at least let them know God is commanding them, to repent and believe.

The man who believes God repents; the repentant soul puts his trust in the Lord when the Gospel is revealed to him. Theologians may wrangle over this, but the fact is, no man repents until the Holy Spirit produces repentance in his soul through the truth. No man believes the Gospel and rests in it for his own salvation until he has judged himself as a needy sinner before God.

Have you ever repented? Are you ever repenting?