

Preparing for Jesus

(For sermon on 12th December- 2021)

Before we begin: Last study we looked at the promised New Covenant from Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Jeremiah 33:14-17. What were the highlights of this covenant?

God promised a New Covenant, through the prophet Jeremiah:

- *It will be different to the old covenants because people were unable to keep it because of their sin*
- *Instead, God will send a descendant of David, a Righteous Branch and Saviour – Jesus*
- *Jesus can keep God's covenants and fully obey God – because Jesus is God's Son; He is perfect and sinless; He becomes the once and for all sacrifice for sin by His death on the cross; animal sacrifices for sin are no longer necessary.*
- *But God also promises that we will have His law in our minds and in our hearts. This happens because Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to come and live in each believer.*

Before we read from Malachi: What is the context of the book of Malachi?

Malachi prophesied between 445BC and 425BC

The prophet Malachi assures the postexilic Jewish community (those who have returned from Babylonian exile under Ezra and Nehemiah) that the Messianic King will come not only to judge his people but also to bless and restore them.

The book of Malachi was written to confront the spiritual complacency and indifference that had overcome the people of God.

Chapter 1 – Israel questions God's love – but God shows how He loves them. Israel asks how they have despised the Lord and defiled His ministry; God tells them it's by their blemished sacrifices and worship.

Chapter 2 – God rebukes the wicked priesthood who have married foreign wives who worship foreign gods and says that the priests have a low view of marriage and too easily accept divorce; and they question God's justice?

Chapter 3 – So God promises 2 messengers. The first messenger prepares the way for the second. The second messenger will bring purifying judgment; so, God tells the people to return to Him instead of robbing Him with improper worship and tithing. Yet still, Israel doubts that it's worth serving God; and yet as always there is a faithful remnant who are God's treasured possession.

Chapter 4 – God's last word in the Old Testament – There will be a coming judgment – the Sun of Righteousness (Jesus) will come– the wicked and the righteous will be dealt with accordingly. The people must remember the Law of Moses; and God promises to send the prophet Elijah before this judgment comes; his job will be to turn hearts of parents and children towards each other and towards God

Read Malachi 3:1

1. There are two messengers in verse 1; who is the first messenger? (cf. Matthew 11:10; Mark 1:2 and Luke 7:27)

The first messenger is John the Baptist.

- *We know this because in Matthew 11:10, Jesus quotes Malachi 3:1 and He is talking about John the Baptist.*
- *Mark 1:2 also quotes Malachi 3:1 and is introducing John the Baptist*
- *And in Luke 7:27, Jesus also quotes Malachi 3:1 and He is again talking about John the Baptist.*

2. What will the first messenger do in verse 1? (cf. Matthew 3:3)

He is to prepare the way for the Lord – and as Matthew 3:3 says; this means making a straight path for the Lord to enter people's hearts.

3. Who is the second messenger in verse 1; and what's His task?

The Lord Himself. – He is the messenger of the covenant (that Jeremiah talked about last week)

4. What does it mean that “**suddenly the Lord will come to His Temple**”? Where does that find its fulfilment?

Background: God's presence had entered the Temple in Solomon's day (1 Kings 8:62-66 and 2 Chronicles 7:1-11); God's presence leaves the Temple in Ezekiel 10:1-22.

Now Malachi is saying, the Lord will return to His temple.

Fulfilment in a few places:

- *Jesus is taken to the Temple as a child (Luke 2:2)*
- *Jesus is in the Temple as a boy (Luke 2:41)*
- *Jesus is tempted by the Devil and taken to the Temple (Luke 4:9)*
- *Major fulfilment: Jesus drives out the traders in the Temple in Luke 19:45-48 (Also, Matthew 21:12-16; Mark 11:15-18; John 2:13-16)*
- *Jesus **IS** the Temple (John 2:19-21)*

Read Malachi 3:2-5

5. What will the second messenger do in verse 2 and 3?

He will bring a purifying judgment – like a refiner's fire (which removes all the impurities in precious metals) or a launderers soap (which cleans up the dirty laundry). Note: both the fire and soap are to clean and purify; not to destroy!

He will in particular clean up the Levite tribe (the priesthood which he had condemned in chapter 2)

6. What picture is being given in verses 3 and 4?

The cleansing will allow proper offerings and worship to be done in righteousness; not the corrupt worship that was going on in Malachi's time.

7. How would you summarize what the second messenger is doing in verse 5?

It seems Malachi's time was not much different to today: sorcerers (claiming to have magical powers); adulterers; perjurers; defrauders; oppressors; and unjust.

*God's ultimate goal, through this promised messenger Jesus, is to **cleanse society and change the hearts of people, so that they return to God.***

Jesus' death on the cross, cleanses believers (those who repent of their sin) from their sins and the Holy Spirit turns people's hearts back towards God.

But remember, the final judgment on this sinful world, will only happen when Jesus returns in judgment at His second coming. (Matthew 12:36-37; John 5:22, 27; Acts 17:31; Romans 14:10-12; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Hebrews 9:27; and Revelation 20:11-15)

Read Matthew 3:1-12

8. As the first messenger of Malachi 3:1, what is John the Baptist's purpose in verses 1 and 2?

Preaching that people must repent because the Kingdom of Heaven is near

9. What is repentance?

To feel or express sincere regret or remorse about one's wrongdoing or sin.

To do a complete U-turn – a person is heading away from God and going their own way, not God's way – then they make a complete U-turn, acknowledge their sin and rebellion against God; they say sorry to God and then

head in God's direction, following God's ways and put their faith in Jesus' death for their sins to be forgiven and put their faith in His resurrection for eternal life.

10. What prophecy is fulfilled in verse 3?

Verse 3 fulfills the prophecy that we read from Malachi 3:1. Also fulfills Isaiah 40:3; and also mentioned in Luke 1:76 and John 1:23.

11. Which former prophet is John the Baptist like? (cf. 2 Kings 1:1-8; Malachi 4:5; Matthew 11:13-15)

John is like Elijah.

2 Kings 1:1-8 describes Elijah's ministry (similar to John's in that he preaches for people to return to God) and describes Elijah's appearance (camel hair and leather belt around his waist).

Malachi 4:5 says God will send Elijah but remember the Old Testament Elijah has already been and gone before Malachi's time; so, this has to be a future Elijah.

Matthew 11:13-15 – Jesus is talking about John the Baptist and says this about John, “if you are willing to accept it, he [John] is the Elijah who was to come.”

12. What response to his ministry did John receive in verses 5 & 6?

He had people come to him from Jerusalem, Judea and the whole region of Jordan.

And they were confessing their sins (i.e., repenting) and he baptized them in the Jordan river.

13. Why would John call the Pharisees and Sadducees “a brood of vipers”?

Pharisees: The Pharisees were an influential religious sect within Judaism in the time of Christ and the early church. They were known for their emphasis on personal piety (the word Pharisee comes from a Hebrew word meaning “separated”), their acceptance of oral tradition in addition to the written Law, and their teaching that all Jews should observe all 600-plus laws in the Torah, including the rituals concerning ceremonial purification. The Pharisees were mostly middle-class businessmen and leaders of the synagogues. Though they were a minority in the Jewish Council, Sanhedrin, and held a minority number of positions as priests, they seemed to control the decision-making of the Sanhedrin because they had popular support among the people.

(See link for more information: <https://www.gotquestions.org/Pharisees.html>)

Sadducees: During the time of Christ and the New Testament era, the Sadducees were a religiopolitical group that held a great deal of power among the Jews in Israel. The Sadducees worked hard to keep the peace by agreeing with the decisions of Rome (Israel at the time was under Roman control), and they seemed to be more concerned with politics than religion. Because they were accommodating to Rome and were the wealthy upper class, they did not relate well to the common man, nor did the common man hold them in high opinion. The commoners related better to those who belonged to the party of the Pharisees. Though the Sadducees held the majority of seats in the Sanhedrin, history indicates that much of the time they had to go along with the ideas of the Pharisaic minority, because the Pharisees were more popular with the masses.

(See link for more information: <https://www.gotquestions.org/Sadducees.html>)

Jesus used the same expression (“vipers”) about these characters (in Matthew 12:34; 23:33; and John 8:44). The use of “viper” is a reference to evil and to the serpent in the garden, devouring people with his lies (his native language). Both John and Jesus are labelling the Pharisees and Sadducees as having corrupt, evil and hypocritical hearts.

14. What does John say the Pharisees and Sadducees should do and should not do, in verses 8 and 9?

They should do: produce fruit that is in keeping with repentance. That is their repentance must be genuine and from the heart – and not lip service to God and hypocritical. They can't just turn up to be baptized and not have genuinely repented.

They should not do: they should not rely on the fact that they are descendants of Abraham (i.e., trusting in their Jewish heritage rather than God) to save them from God's wrath.

15. What is John warning of, in verse 10?

The ax ready to chop the worthless tree down is a picture of God's judgment on sin.

"No mere pruning and trimming work did John come to do; he was the handler of a sharp axe that was to fell every worthless tree." (Spurgeon)

16. What does John promise about the second messenger of Malachi 3:1, in verse 11?

John is not worthy to carry this second messenger's sandals.

This second messenger (Jesus) will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, rather than the baptism of water for repentance.

17. What does it mean to **baptize with the Holy Spirit**? How might that relate to the New Covenant?

This is the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit, promised with the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:33 [put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts] and Ezekiel 37:14 [I will put my spirit in you] and Joel 2:28-29 [I will pour out my Spirit on all people...I will pour out my Spirit in those days]. See also Isaiah 11:2.

18. What picture does John give in verse 12?

Here we have a picture of judgment. A winnowing fork tossed both the good (wheat) and the bad (chaff) in the air. The wind blew the chaff (bad) away and the heavier wheat (good) fell to the ground. The scattered chaff was swept up and burned in a fire and the threshing floor cleared (Don Carson)

19. **Ponder:** What is the essence of John the Baptist's ministry?

The essence of John's ministry is to repent and return to the Lord before it's too late. He is preparing people's hearts to meet Jesus, their Saviour.

20. **Ponder:** How does John's ministry and this passage help describe what must take place when someone comes to faith in Jesus?

There has to be a turning back to God in genuine repentance and sorrow for a person's sin. Then a commitment to follow God's way not their own way. Then, that person is ready to accept Jesus's death for their sins to be forgiven; and to accept Jesus' gift of eternal life, through His resurrection. With the inclusion of how John dealt with the Pharisees and Sadducees, we see that this faith in Jesus, must be a genuine heart-felt faith and not in any way lip-service or hypocritical. Having trusted in Jesus, we next to keep in step with the Holy Spirit and produce the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

21. **Ponder:** As we approach Christmas and celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus; in what ways could we be like John the Baptist?

- *Continually, repent of the sin in our lives*
- *Be prepared to give our testimony of how we came to belief in Jesus.*
- *Share our faith and certain hope we have in Jesus – taking the Great Commission seriously.*
- *Realise the urgency of sharing our faith; as we don't know when Jesus will return. Be bold!*
- *Christmas is a wonderful time to not only fix our eyes on Jesus but to prepare others to meet Jesus!*

Optional Challenge: Read Matthew 11:1-11. What does Jesus mean in Matthew 11:11 when He says “*Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he*”? How can **we** be greater than John the Baptist?

1. *In Matthew 11:3 – Despite John’s wonderful ministry of repentance and preparing people to meet the Lord; John is uncertain if Jesus is the ONE who is to come. We are in a greater position than John, because we are on the other side of Jesus’ death on the cross and His resurrection, and we KNOW Jesus is the ONE.*
2. *In God’s grace, because of the age we were born (other side of the cross) we have seen and heard what John didn’t see and hear (Matthew 13:16 and Hebrews 12:39) – because we have the complete Bible in our hands.*
3. *Whilst John was certainly filled with the Spirit in a real way (Luke 1:15), he didn’t live to experience the Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit he had predicted (Acts 2) whereas even the most recent new-covenant believer is indwelt with the Holy Spirit and lives under the kingship of Jesus*

JC Ryle says: “The child who knows the story of the cross possesses a key to religious knowledge which the patriarchs and prophets never enjoyed”. Not even, John the Baptist.

Finish in prayer: Thanking God for the ministry of repentance; the sacrament of baptism; the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, through Jesus; and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. As we approach Christmas, ask God to give us opportunities to prepare the way for people to come and meet Jesus.