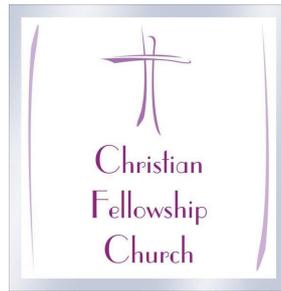


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Ministry of the Word
Sunday 19th January 2020
by Vincent Gannon

Scripture: Matthew 3:1-6

Subject: Part 5 – The King’s Herald: John the Baptist.

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ² and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” 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.’” 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. ⁵ Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him ⁶ and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.

Each of the first four books in the New Testament incorporate the same message of the gospel, the good news. The notion that these books constitute good news implies that there's a potential for bad news, *doesn't it?* Often we get good news when something has the potential of being bad. Like the doctor who took his patient into a room and said, *"I have some good news and some bad news."* The patient said, *"Give me the good news first."* "Well," the doctor said, *"They're about to name a brand new incurable disease after you."*

The gospels bring us good news because we need it. Jesus said that he came so we might have a full and meaningful life, a life filled with purpose. Why is good news needed? It's because of sin, and sin separates us from God. The Bible says we all, like sheep, have gone astray. The good news is Jesus bridges the gap between us and God. So far, in the book of Matthew, we have seen how the coming of Jesus was predicted, prepared, and preserved. Miracles took place, all kind of traveling was happening, and angels were appearing left and right guiding the process as God was at work. Now in chapter 3, we are introduced to the man, John the Baptist, who proclaimed bad news/good news as to prepare the way before Jesus’ ministry began. The Bible’s references to the life and ministry of John the Baptist are brief compared

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to other people of God. Verse 1 describes the beginnings of John's public ministry - "*In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,*"

Stop right there. "*In those days*" - What does that mean, what days? There is a time gap between the end of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3. At the end of chapter 2, Mary, Joseph and Jesus had arrived in Nazareth, and Jesus was still a little child. And now, "In those days," John the Baptist was announcing 'the King is coming'. Somewhere over 25 years elapsed, and Matthew totally skips over that time. The word "came" used here in this verse, is a verb that means "an official presentation," "an official individual." The word is used several times to indicate the arrival of a public appearance of an official person, no ordinary individual, but someone of stature, significance, and importance.

The Man, John the Baptist

From Luke 3:2, we learn that John was already in the wilderness. The name John comes from the Hebrew "Johanan" meaning *Jehovah or Yahweh is gracious, or God's gracious gift*. The word Baptist was not a surname, nor did he belong to the First Baptist Church of Nazareth, but he was called this on account of his ministry and the importance he placed upon it. John was a relation of Jesus and would have been familiar with who He was; who He truly is, The Messiah.

Everything about John the Baptist was extraordinary; his public appearance, his life-style, his message, his baptizing, and his humility. Like Jesus, John was born into a simple, obscure family. His father, Zacharias, was one of many priests who took turns ministering in the Temple when their course, or division, was scheduled to serve. He was born to a mother who was barren but also from the priestly tribe of Levi, a descendant of the first high priest, Aaron. There were many such descendants, no place of special dignity or recognition. That was John's family heritage. Yet, from the account of his birth as told to us in Luke 1:5-25,57-66, we see that he was no ordinary individual from the start. His name was not given but bestowed by the Lord Himself. His father Zacharias prophesied concerning him which we see in Luke 1:76 - Zacharias, looking at that precious little life said, "*And thou, child, shall 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 to His people by the remission of their sins, through the tender*

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mercy of our God, whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.' And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his showing to Israel."

He was filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's Elizabeth's womb. The fact that a "fetus" can be filled with the Holy Spirit in the womb gives great support to the idea that children in the womb are in fact human, rightly deserving the designation of person and have the right to be protected. From God's perspective, little babies in the mother's womb are valuable and precious to the Lord.

Jesus called John the greatest man who had ever lived until that time: *"Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist"* (Matthew 11:11). That means, John was greater than Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph; greater still than Moses, Elijah, David, or any of the other Old Testament person of God. He was greater than any of the kings, emperors, philosophers, or military leaders of history; he was even greater than Mary, Jesus' mother. When he had grown, at some point, John the Baptist went to live in the wilderness of Judea, existing much like a hermit, forsaking what little social and economic status he had. Yet Luke recorded of him, *"for he will be great in the sight of the Lord"* (Luke 1:15). The world has its own definition of what makes a "great" person but God's standards are completely different as we see in John.

Jesus also referred to him as a prophet. That's significant, because a prophet was someone who boldly spoke for God. They repeated whatever God was really saying. Prophets were often considered to be politically incorrect; as often they issued warnings of impending judgment, not always liked. John the Baptist was a priest by heritage but became a prophet. He forsook his earthly father's ministry for the sake of his heavenly Father's. Verse 4 describes him a little more for us - *⁴Now John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.*

John was not the slick salesman, but someone who was completely sold out for God. Most of the poor in Jesus' day ate fish, figs, and barley loaves but John ate locusts and wild field honey. John's appearance and lifestyle spoke volumes: *"I'm not sold out to the culture. I'm*

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nobody's pawn. The man doesn't own me. I can tell you the truth, straight up." When you have nothing, you have nothing to lose.

John's primary place of ministry, and his home was in the wilderness of Judea. This was the south end of the Jordan Valley, around the North part of the Dead Sea, and it's bleak there. The land is arid, bleak, just dry land extending. The wilderness area of Judea was a settled wilderness with several settlements including the ancient city of Jericho. I think there was something symbolic in it, because John was calling people away from the system. John was calling them away from the hypocrisy of their religiosity. Away from the deadness of their temple worship. Away from all of the luxury and the involvement in the system, and calling them out to a desolate spot where they could begin to focus on the desolate, arid qualities of their own hearts. There, they may have been freer to think and truly hear, where they didn't have the influences of all those around them, and all the things they had become so comfortable with. They had to leave the system. They had to leave the city of Jerusalem. They had to leave the temple. They had to go way out in the wilderness, way out in desolation, to meet the man, the greatest man that ever lived, the herald of the coming King.

It was at a specified time when God spoke to John's heart, calling him out from the wilderness to be the Lord's herald and he thundered out the message God had given him in that desert; to announce the coming of the King and the need of the people to get ready for Him. John the Baptist was born of obscure parents, dressed strangely even for his day, and carried on his ministry mostly in out-of-the-way and unattractive places. None of it was incidental or circumstantial. To look at this man in the natural would neither encourage you to consider him as a great man, much less to know where he came from and the kind of life he lived. The world would not consider great, yet when he spoke there was a difference, the Holy Spirit difference. John's greatness did not lay in his natural abilities or his unique background. His greatness was on account of God from start to finish. I'm not John the Baptist, nonetheless, I too have been chosen by God, like you, and all that might ever be asked of me is to be a mirror, to reflect my association with the King. What do you see when you look into the spiritual mirror (James 1:23-25)? What does your life reflect? Do you have the desire to not just know about God, but to really know Him, surrender to him?

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Verse 2 says John came preaching, that is 'to herald', to announce that the Messiah had come and it was time for the people to be prepared, this was his mission.

The Mission -

At that time, there was a heightened expectation among the people for the coming Messiah. When John arrived, there hadn't been a prophet in Israel for 400 years. Seemingly out of the blue, in the people's mind, walked John, out of the wilderness, wearing a rough, camel hair coat (like Elijah), offering this one provocative message: *"Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!"* (Matthew 3:2). This is a message of challenge and hope, good news, bad news.

John the Baptist's mission was to herald the coming of Jesus and prepare the way. In chapter 1, Jesus' kingship is shown by his birth; by His royal lineage, a descent of King David and by His miraculous conception. In chapter 2, His kingship is shown by the circumstances surrounding His birth; by the homage of the magi, the hatred of Herod, and God's miraculous protection of the young Jesus. Now, Matthew gives us more evidence through John the Baptist heralding the King's arrival, the Messiah, the One who was greater still.

In ancient times, it was common for a herald to precede the arrival of a monarch, to announce his coming and to prepare for his safe and proper travel. The herald would make sure that the roadway was as smooth and uncluttered as possible. Holes would be filled, rocks and debris would be removed, and unsightly litter would be burned or hidden. As the group travelled along and worked, the herald would proclaim the king's coming to everyone he encountered. John knew his position and his task. The mission and ministry of John in the wilderness was predicted in Isaiah 40:3. John's road were men's hearts. The obstacles on the road are the barriers of sin! The way of the Lord is the way of repentance. We turn away from sin and we turn to Jesus. We turn from our crooked paths to the straight and narrow way of the king. He never sought or accepted honour for himself, but only for the One whose coming he proclaimed. As a child John no doubt had been told many times of the angel's announcement of his birth and his purpose, a purpose from which he never wavered,

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compromised, or tried to gain personal recognition or advantage. When questioned by the priests and Levites who had been sent from

Jerusalem to ask his identity, John replied, *"I am not the Christ"* (John 1:19-20).

He also denied being Elijah (John 1:21). When they persisted in knowing who he was, he simply said, *"I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as Isaiah the prophet said"* (John 1:23).

Hundreds of years earlier, the prophet Isaiah had said that he would be: *"A voice of one crying out: Prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness; make a straight highway for our God in the desert"* (Isaiah 40:3).

To step to one side for a moment, the question about him being Elijah introduces an important truth. At every orthodox Jewish Passover ceremony, even today, a cup is reserved at the table for Elijah. At the circumcision of an orthodox Jewish baby boys, a chair is placed for Elijah. The anticipation is, if Elijah ever came and sat on the chair or drink from the cup, the Messiah's arrival would be imminent. This belief is based on Malachi 4:5-6, when the prophet predicted:

"Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. And he will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers."

John was not the literal, resurrected Elijah most Jews of his day were expecting, or that many Jews of our own day expect; but he was indeed the Elijah that the prophet Malachi predicted would come. Luke 1:17 confirmed this when it says that John *"will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah."*

The Elijah commonly expected by the Jews, was not the Elijah of God's plan and this was stated plainly by Jesus Himself after John the Baptist had been imprisoned and killed.

"Elijah is coming and will restore all things; but I say to you, that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished.' . . . Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist" (Matthew 17:11-13).

The Jews rejected John the Baptist as the true Elijah who was to come because they didn't understand the prophecy God had originally given through Malachi, even when Jesus

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explained about John: *"If you care to accept it, he himself is Elijah, who was to come"* (Matthew 11:14). What they failed to see was, though John was not actually Elijah, he was the fulfilment of the prophecy that Elijah would come. He was the Elijah of the New Testament. The last statement of the whole Old Testament, the prophet Malachi closed with this, *"The next man on the scene will be Elijah, and he is going to prepare you for the coming of the King."*

John was not accepted, he was however, ridiculed, imprisoned, and beheaded because he was not received by the great body of God's chosen people. John the Baptist was rejected as the coming Elijah and just as the herald was rejected, so was the King he heralded. John was beheaded, and Jesus was crucified. Israel was momentarily set aside as the time of the Gentiles, the age of the church and of grace was ushered in. It was evident that John was not out to impress man but he was very much aware that God had chosen him for a purpose which had to do with the Messiah and Israel's King. With that mission, he has a message -

The Message

John the Baptist had a clear message of how people needed to prepare for the King and the coming Kingdom. John's message was simple, so simple it could easily be summarized in one word: **Repent** (3:2a; Acts 13:24; 19:4). The Greek word used by Matthew is *metanoeo*. In his outstanding commentary on Matthew, John A. Broadus observed that *"wherever this Greek word is used in the New Testament the reference is to changing the mind and the purpose from sin to holiness."* It incorporates not only regret or sorrow, but a change of thinking and will, resulting in a changed life. Sin will always lead us away from God. Repentance leads us back to God. It like this story, a Sunday School teacher who once asked a class what was meant by the word "repentance". A little boy put up his hand and said, "It is being sorry for your sins." Then a little girl also raised her hand and said, "It is being sorry enough to quit."

And that's it in a nutshell. I am convinced more and more, many, **even believers**, don't seem to understand real repentance. They seem to practice repeating sin more than repenting from sin. As Christians, we need to be honest about what category we fall into, *have we and do we repent from sin, or are we just saying sorry, getting on with life, on our terms, continuing on*

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in the old ways, worldly ways, with no bearing of Christ in our lives? Some make a profession of faith for eternal fire insurance, they even can go along with the beliefs but they don't surrender their lives. A new life in Christ, is not the old life plus, or the attitude that you are not going to change even for God. That's not salvation whatever else you want to call it. John's message is of immense help here. You must repent, you must surrender. True Repentance denotes not just any change, but always a change going away from sin and towards righteousness. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 7:9-10

"The sorrow that is according to the will of God," Paul says, "produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation".

The call of John was a personal call for a personal spiritual change, impacting every part of an individual's life, a change that would lead his listeners to be ready for the coming King. It was a call to personal accountability and responsibility. This call has not changed.

John's call to repent could be rendered, **"be converted"**. John's message of preparation for the coming of the King was repentance, conversion, demand for a completely different life. This was startling news for Jews who thought that, as God's chosen people, the children of Abraham, the people of the covenant, they deserved and were unconditionally assured of the promised King and kingdom. But their national heritage, the promises and covenants they were given didn't matter. It didn't matter, because they were sinful, and they needed to turn around. It was simple, he was saying: "You are in the same condition as the Gentiles. You have no right to the kingdom unless you repent and are converted from sin to righteousness." He called for a true repentance that results in the fruit of a transformed life and that includes baptism with water. Failure to repent would result in severe judgment, as Matthew 11:20-24 and 12:38-41 demonstrate. Repentance was exactly the same message with which Jesus began His preaching and the apostles began theirs.

***"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand,"** Jesus proclaimed; **"repent and believe in the gospel"** (Mark 1:15; Matthew 3:2; 4:17; Luke 5:32). Mark 6:12 says of the twelve: **"And they went out and preached that men should repent"**.*

In his Pentecost sermon, Peter's concluding words were, **"Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins"** (Acts 2:38. Acts 3:19; 20:21; 26:18). The close connection between repentance and conversion is also indicated in

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texts that do not specifically use the word repentance, yet convey the same idea (Matthew 18:3; Luke 14:33). Paul in Acts 26:20, clearly states that the objective of his ministry was that men *“should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.”*

This message is not for the unsaved alone. The more and more easy belief-ism that is being thought and accepted, the more that are in the Matthew 7:20-21 bracket and that of Revelation 2 and 3. We need to be careful of what version of Christianity we accept. We Christians do not want to fall into sin but sometimes we do. What is the solution? Repent! Falling into sin doesn't condemn anybody, but staying in it does. A visitor at a fishing dock asked an old fisherman who was sitting at the dock; *“If I were to fall into this water, would I drown?”* It was a strange way of asking just how deep the water was; but the fisherman had a good answer; *“No,”* he said. *“Falling’ into the water doesn’t drown anybody. It’s staying under the water that does the drowning”*.

What a jolt for the Jews who thought that they were the favoured of God. What a shock. Repentance is required, deep sorrow accompanied by a change, going from sin to holiness, a conversion that affected the mind and the will and the emotions. This leads us to

The Motive.

The motive John gave for repentance was: *the kingdom of heaven is at hand* (3:2b).

When God's word came to Israel again, the silence was shattered. It was not the expected word of joy, comfort and celebration but a message of warning and rebuke. Despite the prophets many warnings, many of the people were not prepared for John's message. What he said was shocking; it was unexpected and unacceptable. As God's people, they thought they had nothing to do to inherit God's kingdom but simply wait for and accept it. Yet, John's message was God's message. He did not compromise it with the popular misconceptions and delusions of his own day. Maybe one of the reasons God kept Him in the desert for many years was so he wouldn't get cluttered up with bad theology that was in existence in his time. He preached, *“The kingdom is at hand. If you're going to be a part of it, you need to be converted.”* They had to get the bad news first, because they were sinful, and they had to be converted. The kingdom of heaven was at hand, waiting to be ushered in, but Israel was not ready for it.

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What is the Kingdom of Heaven? It is the place where God rules supremely. It is God's reign over the Universe, both Heaven and earth. It is God's rule, in the past, present and the future. It is God's rule in those places now marred by sin and rebellion. The kingdom of heaven is basically an Old Testament concept. David declared that *"the Lord is King forever and ever"* (Psalm 10:16; cf. 29:10), that His kingdom is everlasting, and that His dominion *"endures throughout all generations"* (Psalm 145:13). Daniel speaks of *"the God of heaven [who] will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed"* (Daniel 2:44; cf. Ezekiel 37:25), a *"kingdom [that] is an everlasting kingdom"* (Daniel 4:3). The God of heaven is the King of heaven, and the heavenly kingdom is God's kingdom.

Matthew uses the phrase kingdom of heaven 32 times, and is the only gospel writer who uses it at all. The other 3 use "the kingdom of God". It is probable that Matthew used kingdom of heaven because it was more understandable to his primarily Jewish readers. Jews would not speak God's name (Yahweh, or Jehovah), and would often substitute heaven when referring to Him, much as we do in such expressions as "heaven smiled on me today."

There is no significant difference between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven. The one phrase emphasizes the sovereign Ruler of the kingdom and the other emphasizes the kingdom itself, but they are the same kingdom. Matthew 19:23-24 confirms the equality of the phrases by using them interchangeably.

The kingdom has two aspects, the outer and the inner, both of which are spoken of in the gospels. Those aspects are evident as one moves through Matthew. In the broadest sense, the kingdom includes everyone who professes to acknowledge God. Jesus' parable of the sower represents the kingdom as including both genuine and superficial believers (Matthew 13:3-23), and in His following parable (w. 24-30) includes both wheat (true believers) and tares (false believers). That is the outer kingdom, the one we can see but cannot accurately evaluate ourselves, because we cannot know people's hearts. The other kingdom is the inner, the kingdom that includes only true believers, only those who, as John the Baptist proclaimed, repented and are converted. God rules over both aspects of the kingdom, and He will one

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day finally separate the superficial from the real. Meanwhile He allows the pretenders to identify themselves outwardly with His kingdom.

God's kingly rule over the hearts of men and over the world may be thought of as having a number of phases. The first is the prophesied kingdom, such as foretold by Daniel that God is going to come and set up a kingdom, a kingdom that'll never be destroyed; and Daniel foresaw that Christ would be the King of that kingdom. It was a prophesied kingdom. (Daniel 7). The second phase is the present kingdom, the one that existed at the time of John the Baptist and that he mentions. It is the kingdom that both John and Jesus spoke of as being at hand (Matthew 4:17). The third phase may be referred to as the interim kingdom, the kingdom that resulted because of Israel's rejection of her King. The King returned to heaven and His kingdom on earth now exists only in a mystery form. Christ is Lord of the earth in the sense of His being its Creator and its ultimate Ruler.

The fourth phase can be described as the manifest kingdom, in which Christ will rule, physically, directly, and fully on earth for a thousand years, the Millennium. In that kingdom He will rule both externally and internally. Externally, over all mankind and internally, in the hearts of those who belong to Him by faith. The fifth, and final, phase is the *"eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ," which "will be abundantly supplied" to all of His own*" (2 Peter 1:11).

Many today are in sizable church's and are not ready to meet with the King. All they said was a prayer and told that it was all that was required, and life goes on, no different. The fact that Christ sent the disciples out **to make** followers of Jesus ought to tell us something.

John MacArthur wrote *"People should repent because the King is coming. He deserves and requires no less. The unrepentant and the unconverted cannot give the heavenly king the glory he deserves"* (John MacArthur p. 54).

So John's motive was to bring to bear on Israel such conviction that they confessed they were unfit, sinners, poor, damned, miserable, he was a judgment preacher. He was designed by God from way back in the book of Isaiah to confront a wicked, evil nation and get them right for the arrival of the King. So he fulfilled prophecy.

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Finally we come to **The Ministry**.

Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. (3:5-6)

The Lord will sometimes use wilderness places (quiet places) to prepare or launch the ministry of men and women. The immediate effect of John's preaching was dramatic. People were coming from the great city of Jerusalem, which was a considerable distance away. They came from all Judea, and all the districts around the Jordan. In other words they were coming from all over southern Palestine, including both sides of the Jordan River. As Matthew reports later in his gospel, the people recognized John as a prophet (21:26).

At this time, people were confessing their sins, repenting and being baptised in one go. So baptism was a very important part of conversion during John's ministry. Baptism was not a traditional Jewish ceremony. It was completely different from the Levitical washings, which consisted of washing the hands, feet, and head. The Essenes, a group of Jewish ascetics who lived on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, practiced a type of ceremonial washing that almost resembled baptism. But both the Levitical and the Essene washings were repeated, those of the Essenes as much as several times a day or even hourly. They represented repeated purification for repeated sinning. The only one-time washing the Jews performed was for Gentiles, signifying their coming as outsiders into the true faith of Judaism. A Jew who submitted to such a rite demonstrated, in effect, that he was an outsider who sought entrance into the people of God, an amazing admission for a Jew. Members of God's chosen race, descendants of Abraham, heirs of the covenant of Moses, came to John to be baptized like a Gentile! John's washing, however, was one-time only.

Bruner wrote - **"Baptism is a kind of drowning and cleansing at once, which says in so many words, 'die sin'"** (Bruner p. 73).

A visible, tangible way of expressing the change of heart from within! Bruner also wrote:

"The important thing to see in verse 6 is that the remedy for sin is not denying sin's presence or explaining it away or exculpating it (that is laying fault outside one's self); It is admitting it. We are free from sin only when we face it; we disown it by owning up to it. The first way to repent is to admit our sins openly. Repentance is not first of all a good work; it is freely admitting our bad work, our sin. God forgives only sinners. . . 'he who conceals his

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transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy' (Prov. 28:13)" (Bruner p. 73).

The influence and effects of John's preaching were immediate and widespread. The response was overwhelming and life changing. Baptism is not man's idea but God's. It is not a denominational thing. It is a Biblical thing. It started with John the Baptist at the beginning of our gospels. He came, verse 11 says, to "baptize with water for repentance." It continued in the ministry of Jesus himself. John 4:1 says, "*Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John,*" although it was the disciples, not Jesus who did the actual immersing (John 4:2). Jesus commanded the church to follow as an act of obedience. At the end of his earthly ministry Jesus said, "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit*" (Matthew 28:19). We know of no unbaptized believers in the new testament (except the thief on the cross, Luke 23:43). In Romans 6:2-3, Paul said to a church "*How shall we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?*"

In other words, Christians can't go on wilfully sinning on the fact that we have all died with Christ, as baptism shows. Dead men don't sin. If you ask what the decisive, public way of taking a Christian stand was in the New Testament, the answer is, baptism. The message Peter gave in Acts 2 ended with the words, "*Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ*" (Acts 2:38). Now what does all this tell us about baptism? Three things:

1. It tells us that John's baptism was not simply a continuation of circumcision. Circumcision was a sign of ethnic continuity; baptism was a sign of spiritual reality.
2. John's baptism was a sign of personal, individual repentance, not a sign of birth into a covenant family.
3. John's baptism fits what we are going to see in all the rest of the New Testament.

God calls us today to repent and believe on Christ alone for salvation and to receive the new sign of the new covenant of the people of God : the sign of repentance and faith, baptism. This is the call of God. This is the path of obedience and life. The impact of John's ministry on the Jewish people was profound and unforgettable. The way of the King had been announced

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to them, and they had no excuse for not being ready for His coming. The message of John the Baptist was a call to repentance (v.2); the motive—the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand (v.2). John urged people to prepare for the coming of the Lord (v.3).

But John's message will include several more elements; flee from the wrath to come (v.7); bear fruit (v.8); don't be duped or deceived into thinking your religious roots or godly heritage will give you special treatment on the Day of Judgment (v.9). Recognize and acknowledge the power of God (v.10); fruit is demanded—now (v.10); everyone who bears bad fruit will be condemned (v.10) and once again the people will be urged to repent—and be baptized with water by man (v. 11); repent and be baptized with fire by the Holy Spirit (v.11); and in the end the Messiah will recognize the believer and the make-believer; the wheat and the tares (v.12). In the next few verses John will address the issues of excuses not to repent (v.7); after all the Jews were children of Abraham and recipients of the Law of Moses and a part of the covenant people (v.9).

Some would argue that John's baptism was for the insecure, not necessary for the good and decent Jews who were safe from the wrath of God. Some religious Jews believed that they were safe, exempt, and believed their self-righteous commitment to the man made religious rules would preserve them in the Day of Judgment. As we come to a close, there are a few things that we should think about. The coming of Jesus then required a radical change, the second coming of Jesus must move us also towards genuine radical change. But are we ready? More importantly, are we willing?

Amen.