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The Preparation For The King

If you would turn with me to Matthew 3. We're still working with John the Baptizer. There are two things which make Matt 3 and John's baptism difficult to understand. First, we do not understand the relationship of the unconditional Abrahamic covenant to the conditional Mosaic covenant. The Mosaic covenant was given within the confines of the Abrahamic covenant so that ultimate blessing under the Abrahamic covenant requires obedience to the Mosaic covenant. That tends to bother people who tend not to think of the two covenants as having any relationship because one is unconditional and the other is conditional. But the right understanding is that there is a relationship and the relationship is that the unconditional Abrahamic covenant has conditions in it for enjoying the blessing. If those conditions are not being met then there needs to be repentance so that blessing can be enjoyed under which covenant? The Abrahamic. So John is calling for repentance so that they can meet the conditions for enjoying blessing under the Abrahamic covenant. Second, we don't understand baptism because we tend to read baptism as somehow related to salvation. We live after the death and resurrection of Christ and so we come to the game with salvation in mind and we read of John's baptism and think something salvific is happening here. They didn't know anything about the death and resurrection of Christ. What was baptism to a Jew? Identity. It defined one's identity with a group. That's why we say you can't interpret unless you understand the historical situation. What we're trying to do is put ourselves in the shoes of that generation and think like a 1st century Jew would think. Then we can understand as he would have understood. Unless we do that we can't interpret. That's the historical element in the grammatical-historical method of interpretation. So when we read of John's baptizing understand two things; first, the background is the failure to live up to the demands of the Mosaic covenant and therefore they cannot enjoy the blessings of the

Abrahamic covenant and so John is calling them to repent and second, the baptism is the visible mark of a change in identity. Jews were realizing that the Pharisaic and Sadducean systems were not true expositions of the Mosaic covenant and therefore they needed to repent of those systems and be baptized, sever their identity with those systems and identify with John and his message. It was the only way back into the place of blessing so the nation could enjoy the fulfillment of the blessings under the Abrahamic covenant.

So it's in the context of the official religious system of the Pharisees and Sadducees that John came baptizing. What did we say about John's background that sets him so radically apart from the official leadership? We said John was born of a priestly lineage and we would have expected him to be in the temple, probably aligned with the Sadducees, certainly working with the Sadducees since they governed the temple complex, wearing the fine garments of a priest, eating the finest delicacies of a priest. But instead he comes wearing the garments of a prophet in mourning and eating the food of a prophet from the desert wilderness. John was a prophet and what was the chief role of a prophet? To prosecute the nation for violating the Mosaic covenant. You see in verse 2 the word of prosecution. What do they need to do? Repent! What do they need to repent about? The idea that following the official religious system put them in the place of blessing! They were not in the place of blessing! The Pharisees and the Sadducees said that if you followed their rules and offered their sacrifices then you would be in the place of blessing, they could enjoy the land, etc....But by calling them to repent John obviously disagrees with that assessment. So the call to repent is a call to do what? Have a change of mind. Immediately in the NT you see that repentance has to do with a change of mind. They needed to have a change of mind.

Why did they need to change their mind about the official system of Judaism that was prevalent in the 1st century? Because that system was so contrary to the Mosaic covenant that it was leading the people away from God and into sin. So the repentance goes deeper than religious system into the sin that is naturally produced by following that system. If the nation didn't repent could they have access to the blessings covenanted to Abraham? Could they enjoy the land? No. The blessings under the Abrahamic Covenant of a land, a seed and a blessing are unconditional in that God will ultimately bless them; however, the only way they can access these covenanted blessings is by being

in obedience to the Mosaic covenant. Were they in obedience? No. John is calling them to repent. They were following a false religious system. Did a lot of Jews realize this? Yes, tons of individual Jews are going out to see John. What would they have to do in order for John to baptize them? Repent! The repentance precedes the baptism. That's why verse 11, "I baptize you with water for repentance" does not mean with a view to repentance, the idea that John would baptize you on the promise that you would repent later. No, no, that contradicts verses 7 and 8, they needed to bear fruit that was consistent with repentance before John would baptize them. So any individual that wanted to be baptized would first have had to repent and show fruit proving genuine repentance. When they were baptized they were formally terminating their association with the official religious system and identifying with John and his message. John's message, like the message of all the prophets was to come back to the Mosaic covenant, live according to the Mosaic covenant. Every prophet called the nation back to the Mosaic covenant; obey the covenant. Why did they need to obey the covenant? In order to enjoy the blessing under the Abrahamic covenant.

The whole thing goes back to the covenantal background and John's role as a prophetic forerunner of the King. He's trying to prepare the people for the arrival of the King. They weren't prepared! They were living in sin. What does sin do to your spiritual eyesight? It blinds you. You can't see the truth because your sin is blinding you from the truth. So John's ministry is vital. He's preparing the way. Do you think he pointed out sin in the nation? Absolutely. What are the people doing in verse 6 at the same time they were being baptized? They were confessing their sins. What happens when you confess your sins? The blindness is lifted, spiritually you can see again. So John's ministry is one of preparing the people for the arrival of the King so that when He arrives they can see Him for who He truly is, as the Davidic King and enthrone Him. I'm thinking that most of the people coming out are already OT believers in the sense of Abraham, that they expected God to send forth a Savior. But they didn't know who the Savior was yet. Once they did they would believe in Him. At this time they were just waiting on Him. But as far as their status before God at this time, I take it they were already justified, they already had faith. The problem was they weren't following the Mosaic covenant, they were following the official religious system and so here they are repenting of that and being baptized, confessing their sins so that when John pointed out the King they were prepared to give Him their

allegiance and then the kingdom could come! So John's ministry was one of preparation.

Note verse 3, **For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said, "THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT!'"** John's ministry was one of crying out to the people to prepare their hearts for the King's arrival. In the ancient world when a king would be coming to visit an area what would he do in advance? He would send his messengers before him to tell all the people he was coming? Why? Because the roads were a mess. They didn't have garbage services, all that was strewn all over the place, wild dogs got into your trash all the time, it was a mess. You don't want your king coming down that road and seeing that mess. What else? The roads were in disrepair. They didn't have a department of transportation that went around fixing the potholes. And you don't want the king to come down a road of potholes and bouncing all over the place, you wanted it smooth. So the messengers would announce that the king was coming and the people would clean up all the trash, repair the road and set out flowers so that when the king and his entourage came through he could enjoy his passage and the people could honor their king. What's the spiritual parallel? The King is coming, he has sent John as His messenger to tell the people He was coming? Why? Because their hearts were a mess. They were full of sin. They needed to prepare their hearts for coming King. What did they need to do? Repent and be baptized by John, confessing their sins; that would be the preparation.

That's verse 3. It's a quote from the OT so what OT passage does Matthew quote here? Isaiah 40:3. All the gospel writers apply Isaiah 40:3 to John. In the original context of Isaiah who is the voice crying in the wilderness? It's Isaiah. Who was Isaiah? He was a prophet. Isaiah was the spiritual messenger in his day and what was his role? Same role, prepare the people for the coming King. All the prophets were to fulfill this function of preparing the people for the coming King. So the original passage refers to Isaiah but Matthew picks it up and applies it to John. What category of quoting the OT does this fall into? Applicational fulfillment. Isa 40:3 is not a prophecy, Isa 40:3 is simply describing Isaiah's preparation of the people in his day for the coming of the Lord. Matthew picks that situation up and applies it to the contemporary situation of John. John was doing what Isaiah had done; he

was preparing the nation spiritually for the Lord's arrival. The way he did this is verse 2, calling them to **repent**.

We said there were three elements to John's message; repent, the kingdom of heaven and at hand. We covered the first element, **repent**. What does **repent** mean? Have a "change of mind." It doesn't mean having sorrow for sin. Someone who repents may have sorrow for their sin but that is not the repentance itself. Repentance is simply the change of thinking that occurs. What has to happen if you're going to change your thinking about something? You have to hear a different message than you are accustomed to hearing. What message did the people hear Sabbath after Sabbath in the synagogue? The message of the Pharisees. What was the message of the Pharisees? Follow the scribal traditions. The scribal traditions were oral laws that had grown up around the Mosaic covenant, they emphasized externals. The intent was to keep people far, far away from breaking the actual Law. It would be akin to saying, if we had a law that said the speed limit was 60mph then I would come along as a Pharisee and say, it's illegal to drive a car period! So what the Pharisaic traditions did was replace the actual Law with another Law; in the process all the traditions had nullified the Law. So John was saying they needed to change their thinking about the Pharisaic system because it was not pleasing to God, it didn't get to the heart of what the Law was all about, it kept the people from what the Law was all about. John's message was really a back to the Bible movement. They needed to repent of the Pharisaic message and identify with John and his message. They would then be prepared for the Lord in that they would be spiritually ready for His arrival, ready to enthrone Him! Enthroned Him! The King is coming! The kingdom is near.

What was the second element of the message? **For the kingdom of heaven is at hand**. In other words, repent because **the kingdom of heaven is at hand**. Uniquely, at this time the kingdom was **at hand** and we'll get to that very important expression in a minute. But the even larger issue at stake here is the definition of **the kingdom of heaven**. Matthew is the only one who uses the term kingdom of heaven and he uses it thirty-two times. Mark and Luke and John never use it, never! There are three issues to discuss surrounding the kingdom of heaven. First, what is the relationship of the expression kingdom of heaven to the more common expression kingdom of God? There has been much ink spilled by dispensationalists trying to show a

distinction between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God. Older dispensationalists like Scofield held that the kingdom of heaven was a wider sphere and included believers and professing believers while the kingdom of God was narrower and contained only true believers, though at times he admits they are synonymous.ⁱ Walvoord agreed saying, “The kingdom of heaven refers to that which is obviously in its outer character a kingdom from above and seems to include all who profess to be subjects of the King. The kingdom of God is more specific and does not seem to include any but true believers who are born again.”ⁱⁱ This distinction gave rise to the view that there is a present mystery form of the kingdom and is defended from the parables of Matt 13. However, the distinction of kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God seems unwarranted for two reasons. First, in parallel passages where Matthew uses kingdom of heaven Mark and Luke use kingdom of God. This shows that they refer to one and the same kingdom. Second, Matthew does use kingdom of God a few times and on one occasion as a synonym for kingdom of heaven (cf Matt 19:23-24). This shows that in Matthew the terms kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God are equivalent.

Second, why does Matthew alone use the expression kingdom of heaven? Why is it never used by Mark or Luke or John? There are at least two reasons. First, because Matthew is written specifically to a Jewish audienceⁱⁱⁱ and the Jews held the name of YHWH in reverence by not using it. Matthew did not want to use the name of YHWH so often that it was perceived by his Jewish readers to be held as common and not sacred. Second, because the expression kingdom of heaven, which is technically, “kingdom of the heavens,” is expressly rooted in the prophecies of Daniel 2, 4 and 7. This portion of Daniel’s book was originally written in Aramaic. Most Jews in the 1st century did not speak Hebrew but Aramaic. Thus Matthew’s use of this Aramaic expression “kingdom of the heavens” would certainly ring a bell with 1st century Jews whose attention would immediately be drawn to God’s kingdom program as revealed in Daniel.

Finally, what do the terms kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God refer to? That is, what is the nature of the kingdom? Is it a heavenly kingdom or an earthly kingdom? Interestingly, Matthew doesn’t give us a kingdom concept. Where did we say Matthew got his kingdom concept? From the OT covenants. What kingdom concept do the OT covenants give us? They reveal an earthly kingdom. As Toussaint says, “Throughout the entire Gospel of Matthew both

terms always refer to the literal, earthly kingdom promised and prophesied in the Old Testament. When the church is mentioned in connection with the kingdom, the church and the kingdom are not to be confused. The church will be in the kingdom as its spiritual nucleus, but the church is not the kingdom or *vice versa*.”^{iv} This view is known as the one kingdom view.

The one kingdom view, in my estimation, is proven by at least three four lines of argument. First, neither John nor Jesus re-defined the kingdom to mean anything other than the OT kingdom promised in the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. If a new concept of the kingdom was being introduced, surely this concept would have been explained by John and Jesus. The fact they did not proves that the kingdom in view is the same earthly kingdom expected by all the prophets as promised in the OT covenants. Second, in Matt 10:5-6 the disciples are told to restrict the offer of the kingdom to the nation Israel, do not go in the way of the Gentiles...go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Yet if there was a heavenly form of the kingdom available to Gentiles at the time then why limit the kingdom offer to the nation Israel? Third, in Acts 1:6, after the cross of Christ, the kingdom was still being anticipated by the disciples. “Is it at this time?” The disciples ask,” that “You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” But again, if a form of the kingdom had already begun then why did the Lord not assure them that they had already entered an inaugurated form of the kingdom? Fourth, in Acts 3:19-21, after the Day of Pentecost and the formation of the church, the kingdom is still being offered by Peter and the disciples. “Repent,” Peter says, “and return, in order that the times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.” The conclusion should be clear. There is but one kingdom, it is earthly as defined by the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants and it did not come in the 1st century.

The third part of John’s message is the end of verse 2, this kingdom was at that time, **at hand**. This expression evidently indicates something about the kingdom that had not always been true. No prior prophet announced that the kingdom was **at hand**; when John came it was **at hand**. Why was it now **at hand** whereas formerly it was not **at hand**? There are two prophecies which had to be fulfilled before the kingdom could be **at hand**. First, the fourth Gentile kingdom predicted by Daniel 2 and 7 ruled as world sovereign. Rome was that fourth kingdom and it was sovereign over the world. If John had come during the third kingdom of Greece John could not have said the

kingdom was **at hand** because the fourth empire of Rome had not come. So the kingdom was not **at hand** during any of the first three kingdoms predicted by Daniel. Now that the fourth kingdom of Rome had come it could be said that the kingdom was **at hand**. Second, what other prophecy made it now **at hand** whereas before it was not? The seventy weeks of Daniel 9 were coming near to their completion. Dan 9 had predicted seventy weeks of years, or 490 years, before the kingdom of God would come. The 490 years had begun in 444BC with the decree of Artaxerxes. Messiah was scheduled to come after the first sixty nine weeks or 483 years. It was just now at this time, around AD29, that they had entered the 69th seven. If John had come even four years before he could not say the **kingdom** was **at hand** because they would have been in the 68th seven and not the 69th. But now that they were in the 69th the kingdom was **at hand**. So two prophecies in the OT establish the timing of John's coming and his message as unique; first, they were living in the fourth and final kingdom before the kingdom of God was to come and second, they were living in the 69th week when the Messiah was to come. In this sense, the kingdom was near though it had not come. The kingdom can only come after the 70th week has run its course.

Now as an aside, when John is preaching that the kingdom is **at hand** he does not know who the King is. We know that John knew Jesus because they were cousins but in John 1 John the Baptist tells us that he did not recognize Him as the Messiah. He also tells us that is one reason he came baptizing with water; so that the Messiah would be made known to all Israel. And when the Spirit descended as a dove and lighted on Him John pointed Jesus out as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." So at this time John did not know who the Messiah was. His point in baptizing then was to draw the Messiah out so that those who had repented and been baptized could believe in Him. So at this time the kingdom was **at hand**.

Now this word **at hand** has been hotly contested by those who see multiple forms of the kingdom. To be sure, when John says the kingdom was **at hand** we take it that the kingdom had not come yet, only that it had drawn near. Toussaint says, "The verb here is *εγγιζω* which means *to draw near* and not *to be here*. A good illustration is found in Matthew 21:1 ("And when they drew nigh unto Jerusalem,..." KJV)."v The verb is in the perfect tense which means the kingdom had drawn near and remained in a state of nearness. When the King came into the world the kingdom had drawn near in that the King was

present and it was the King who would bring in the kingdom.^{vi} However, for the kingdom to come the nation Israel had to accept the King. Because they did not the kingdom only came near, it never arrived.

This understanding, however, is disputed by those who hold to a dual kingdom view. They claim that the expression **at hand** should be translated as *here*. For example, Progressive Dispensationalist Darrell Bock of Dallas Theological Seminary says, “The kingdom has drawn near,” meaning it is “here” in the sense of “arrival.” The kind of kingdom Bock claims had already arrived was a spiritual kingdom of Christ’s reign in the heart. They argue that all who repented at that time had Christ’s reign of righteousness begin in their hearts. This is another view of the kingdom; the idea that the kingdom had come into people’s hearts. It had not merely drawn near, it was here inside people. However, there are several objections to this idea. First, none of Bock’s examples prove that the word *εγγιζω* means “here.” Lane says, “The linguistic objections to the proposed rendering ‘has come’ are weighty, and it is better to translate ‘has come near.’” Second, “the Lord Jesus never spoke of the kingdom entering people; He only said that people will enter the kingdom.”^{vii} In other words, if those who repented had the kingdom entering them, this concept was never explained. The popular citation of the KJV translation of Luke 17:20-21 that “the kingdom of God is within you,” is terribly mistranslated. Most recognize that Jesus could not have meant that the kingdom enters people since the people He is speaking to are the Pharisees. However, Progressive Dispensationalists say that the passage proves that the kingdom was already present because the King was present. This may seem like a strong argument until the context of Luke 17 is understood. Jesus was referring to His future second advent and not His first advent. When Jesus used the expression “the kingdom is among you” He meant that the kingdom will suddenly arrive in the world; that it will not come gradually with an accumulation of signs that can be observed, but instead, like lightning it will suddenly be among you.^{viii} There is no such thing as a kingdom entering people; only people entering the kingdom. Those who think that the kingdom enters people have some serious implications when they get to the gospel message. For them, they think that John the Baptist is preaching the gospel message here and that those who repented were becoming believers. When they became believers Jesus entered their hearts and began to reign. Because Jesus’ kingdom reign is so powerful it will necessarily produce good works. When we see these good works we can be

assured that we are truly believers. This is Lordship salvation and it all begins with a view that the kingdom is within you and that Christ is ruling in your heart. I do not see the NT as teaching this. There is no spiritual form of the kingdom either in you or being exercised from heaven. The kingdom is yet future. It is earthly as defined by the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants and the prophetic program laid out by Daniel. Being in the fourth kingdom of Rome it had drawn near with the preaching of John the Baptizer. The King was in the world and He was the one who would restore the OT kingdom if Israel prepared to meet Him by repenting and undergoing John's baptism.

ⁱ Cf New Scofield Reference Bible, NIV, p 972.

ⁱⁱ Walvoord, *Ibid.*, p 30.

ⁱⁱⁱ Progressive Dispensationalist David Turner disagrees.

^{iv} Toussaint, *Ibid.*, 68.

^v Toussaint, *Ibid.*, p 63.

^{vi} The concept of drawing near does not preclude proximity but is probably best understood as imminence. The OT uses the corresponding adjective with respect to the imminence of the day of the LORD (e.g. Isa 13:6; Joel 1:15; 2:1; 3:14; Obad 15; Zeph 1:7, 14). The expression was one of imminent danger if the corresponding message was not heeded.

^{vii} Herbert Bateman IV, *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, p 235.

^{viii} A futuristic present. See that the context favors the futuristic sense.

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