

12/10/23 Christ Fellowship

A Christmas Prophet – Matthew 3:11-12

Well, here we go, officially entering the Christmas holiday season! I hope this is a joyful time for you when we all get together and celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And who doesn't love a newborn baby? A baby's laugh is one of the most beautiful things you will ever hear. Unless it is 3 a.m., you're home alone, and you don't have a baby. The last time I flew on an airplane, I sat next to a mother with her newborn. I didn't think it was possible for a human to cry for four hours straight. I think even the mother was surprised I could cry that long.

We love to think about Jesus as a baby, born in a barn and placed in a manger. For the last month, we have been looking at what various prophets foretold about God and how they are still speaking to us today. And several prophets foretold the birth of Jesus. **Isaiah 9:6** says, *"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."* And **Micah 5:2** says, *"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."* And **Isaiah 7:14** says, *"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."*

And we love to think of that little seven-pound, six-ounce precious baby boy wrapped in swaddling clothes and cooing contentedly in his virgin mother's arms. What a sweet picture that is, right? But you might not think of that baby Jesus growing up and becoming the righteous, final Judge; the One who brings peace and joy and welcomes us as good and faithful servants into Heaven but also the One who sentences unbelievers to Hell.

Well, there is prophecy about that as well. As you turn to the book of **Matthew chapter 3**, I want to remind you of the prophet John. There are only a few New Testament prophets mentioned. Most prophets we think of are Old Testament prophets. And those prophets prophesied about things they would never see. When Isaiah prophesied about Jesus, his prophecies wouldn't come true for some 700 years. But when John prophesied about Jesus, he could literally point Him out. *"There He is. Right there. Jesus, raise your hand."*

As you know, John was quite a character. He lived in the desert and wore crazy clothes and ate crazy food. And I have an idea he didn't have a lot of friends. Mainly because he lived in the desert and wore crazy clothes and ate crazy food but also because John's outspokenness was off-putting to lots of people. Sometimes I hear people call themselves outspoken or plain

spoken. They say they just call them like they see them. And you can call yourself that but most people call that being a jerk. Try having some tact and some sensitivity when you speak.

But John was speaking for God and if God told him to say something, John just said it. So, in **Matthew chapter 3**, John is out by the Jordan River baptizing people. He looks up and several of the religious leaders from town have come to check out what was going on and John immediately tears into them.

Now, it wasn't uncommon for people to be baptized in those days but the Jews did it as a symbolic cleansing of sin. And it was just for show. John said his baptism was for repentance. The Jews didn't know anything about true repentance. They thought since they were descendants of Abraham, that was enough.

Well, let's read what John said to them and how this led to his prophecy of Jesus. Let's start in **chapter 3, verse 7** and go through **verse 12**. *But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 10 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*

11 "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

That John had the message of the prophets down, didn't he? Like the Old Testament prophets before him, John came saying, *"I have good news and bad news."* Almost all the old prophets said something about judgment and comfort. There is comfort for those who believe and there is judgment for those who don't. And that is just what John is saying here.

But let's look closer at something that you may have a question about before we go on. Why did John say he was baptizing? He was baptizing for repentance. Why are we baptized today? Well, repentance is definitely involved but it is not exactly the same as what John was doing. Now, that word "baptize" literally means to dunk or immerse under water. I know some churches do it another way but that is not how John did it nor how Jesus was baptized or commands that we get baptized.

Our baptism today is symbolic of Jesus going into the ground in death and rising again in life. It does not cleanse us from sin or wash anything away spiritually. It is our way of saying, *"I'm with Him. I am with Jesus. I want to always be associated with Jesus."* We could bury you in the ground out back when you become a Christian and dig you up three days later but that's not very efficient. So, we do it symbolically in water as we fully immerse you.

But repentance is required for baptism today and it leads right into what John was saying about Jesus. So, what is repentance? Repentance is a change. It is literally a military word that means to be marching in one direction and then to turn around and march in the other direction. There is no salvation without repentance. There is no need for baptism without repentance.

Repentance is not confession of sin. There are plenty of examples in scripture of people who confessed their sin but did not repent. They had no real change in their life. They kept marching in the same direction they were going. Hard-hearted Pharaoh said, "I have sinned" in Exodus 10. Double-minded Balaam said, "I have sinned" in Numbers 22. Remorseful Achan said, "I have sinned" in Joshua 7. Insincere Saul said, "I have sinned" in 1 Samuel 26. And remorseful Judas said, "I have sinned" in Matthew 27. (W. A. Criswell Sermon Library | Great Words of Salvation: Repentance (wacriswell.com)) But none of them really changed. They were sorry but not repentant.

Change is when God came into Billy's life and turned a drug addict inmate into an excited preacher and follower of Jesus. Change is when God came into Brian's life and made a moral but Hell-bound man submit and give God control of his life. Change is when God came into Lois' life and gave her peace and joy when this world had no peace and joy. Change is when God came into my life as a boy and I said I didn't want to be a slave to sin anymore. I want to be a slave to God. None of us are perfect. We all sometimes slide off the right path but we immediately ask God for forgiveness and we get back on the right path. That is change. That is repentance.

And that repentance is a one-time deal where you go to God in submission and ask for forgiveness but it is also an ongoing repentance. It only takes one time to become a believer but believers will continue to repent and continue to change as God calls them to. That process is called sanctification and it means to continue to look more and more like Jesus all the rest of your life. If you still look and act like you did when you first became a Christian, then something is horribly wrong.

If your language is the same, your thought life is the same and your habits are the same year after year, you have to question if there truly was repentant change. If you still struggle with all

the same things you struggled with before your conversion, it doesn't sound like there was a real conversion, does it? True repentance is once for conversion and ongoing for sanctification.

Our baptism is not just for repentance like John's was, though. John was baptizing before Jesus sacrificed Himself and changed everything. But John prophesied that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. So, what does that mean? Some denominations think that after you get baptized with water, somehow somehow the Holy Spirit will baptize you spiritually and that will be obvious when you start speaking in tongues or you are able to heal or something else. I see no scripture that backs that up.

We know that at the moment of conversion; the moment you truly accept Jesus to be your Lord and Savior, the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of God Himself – comes to live inside of you. It's not a physical thing. It is spiritual and it is a wonderful gift. But it hasn't always been that way. In Old Testament days and before Pentecost (which I'll explain in a minute) the Holy Spirit might come and go in a person's life as He saw fit. But after Jesus was crucified, He rose again and showed Himself to His disciples and told them, *"Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. 5 For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."*

Then, sure enough, a few days later while those disciples were celebrating the feast of harvest that we call the Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came into all men who were truly saved and has promised to remain there. You can read about all that in the first chapter of Acts. That is what it means to be baptized with the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit is in you and you are in Him forever. That's what Isaiah was talking about when he said, *"Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.'" That's why we call it a gift. It is God inside you speaking to you and giving you His wisdom.*

John said that Jesus was coming and would baptize us in the Holy Spirit and with fire. So, that is what he meant by being baptized with the Spirit. Jesus is giving us a gift and that gift is His presence with us all the time through the Spirit. But John also said Jesus was going to baptize with fire. What does that mean?

Well, there are several camps on this and what it means. I read one man say that fire is related to light and warmth, just what God gave us through Jesus. And that sounds good. And if I were trying to tickle itchy ears and grow a big church full of immature and ignorant members, that's what I would go with. But read again that very last part where John says this about Jesus: *His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."* He doesn't say He will burn up the

chaff with light and warmth. He doesn't say the chaff will ride off over the rainbow bridge on unicorns eating lollipops.

The unquenchable fire is the fire of Hell. For those who refuse to believe that Jesus is the Messiah and that through Him and Him only we are saved, there is only one place. There is a real Heaven and a real Hell and both are for eternity. Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit for those who believe and He baptizes with Hell for those that don't. How's that for a merry Christmas message?

I know the subject of Hell makes some people nervous or uncomfortable. And it should. And so many people ask the question, *"How could a loving God send anybody to eternal torment?"* Well, if your version of love is for God to enable and indulge men's sins, then you have a wrong view of love. God has provided a free gift of salvation for all people. All we have to do is believe. And if you choose not to believe (which again means change / repentance) then you are sending yourself to Hell where you will be baptized into the lake of fire.

Yes, that makes me uncomfortable too. It makes me uncomfortable knowing that any of my friends or family or anybody I know might not choose to believe that Jesus is God and came down from all the glories of Heaven to make a way for us to live with Him eternally. See, God the Father said that where there is sin, something has to die. Those are His rules. And for thousands of years, believers sacrificed animals to cover over their sin. And God said that will work...for now.

But then Jesus sacrificed Himself on the cross. He who had no sin took all our sins and gave Himself to be the perfect sacrifice that doesn't just cover over our sins but God says He throws those sins away into the deepest ocean and as far as the east is from the west. And all we have to do is believe. Yes, that belief includes submission and repentance and sanctification and will be illustrated with water baptism and a life that is continually being changed by the power of the Holy Spirit living inside you.

Have you had that happen in your life? Would you like to? You could. Do it right now as the music plays.