



LESSON 1

John prepares the way for the Lord

MATTHEW 3:1-12



Repent in order to enter Christ's kingdom.



“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:2).

Supporting Truths

1. Repent by changing your attitude and actions.
2. Repent to enter the kingdom of heaven.
3. Repent because Jesus is the great King.
4. Repent to escape judgment.
5. Repent to be baptized in the Spirit.

Objectives

1. Define and illustrate repentance.
2. Describe the kingdom of heaven.
3. List three reasons Jesus is worthy of our repentance.
4. Describe who is judged and how.
5. List three blessings that come from baptism in the Spirit.

STUDY THE BIBLE LESSON

John prepares the way for the Lord • Matthew 3:1–12



Lesson Summary

John the Baptist was sent to prepare the way for the coming King. He announced that the kingdom was near, and preached a message of repentance to prepare the people's hearts for their King. This message was necessary because unrepentant sinners will not enter Christ's kingdom. Only those who repent, confessing their sin, will reign with King Jesus when He establishes His earthly kingdom. All those who reject Christ, the rightful King, will suffer endless punishment in the lake of fire.

Spotlight on the Gospel

The gospel is for those who truly repent. Unfortunately, many people are like the Pharisees and Sadducees who came for baptism. They have outwardly confessed their need of salvation, but they have not yet humbly submitted to Christ as their King. So listen to John's warning: the axe is still at the root of the trees. Anyone who claims Christ as their King but does not bear fruit will not enter Christ's kingdom.

THIS WEEK



**John prepares the way
for the Lord**
Matthew 3:1–12

NEXT WEEK



John baptizes Jesus
Matthew 3:13–17

IN TWO WEEKS



**Jesus overcomes
temptation**
Luke 4:1–13

THE BEGINNING OF JESUS' MINISTRY

Lesson Commentary

Repent in order to enter Christ's kingdom.

Matthew's gospel shows that Jesus is Israel's long-expected King. Jesus was born from the kingly line of David (Matt 1:1–17; 2 Sam 7:12–16), Jesus' virgin birth proved He was the Messiah (Matt 1:23; Isa 7:14), and the Magi worshiped Jesus as King (Matt 2:2; Mic 5:2). Next, John the Baptist came as the royal messenger to prepare the way for the King. John the Baptist's ministry shows us that just knowing about Jesus is not enough. As you begin to study the life of Christ, your heart must be ready to receive Him as your King. For that, you must repent.

Repent to enter Christ's kingdom (3:1–4)

John's purpose in life was to prepare the hearts of Israel for the coming kingdom (Matt 3:2). He was the "Elijah" who Malachi prophesied would prepare the way for God (Mal 3:1; 4:5–6; Luke 1:17). John even dressed like Elijah (Matt 3:4; 2 Kings 1:8), confirming that he was the one sent to prepare the Lord's way (Matt 3:3; Isa 40:3). In those days, when a king was coming, roadways would be repaired and cleaned to get ready for the king. That was John's task, except he was preparing hearts, not roads. So when the Jews heard John's message, they remembered the promises about Elijah and expected the Messiah's kingdom to come very soon.

But what is the "**kingdom of heaven**" (Matt 3:2)? It is the realm of God's rule over those who belong to him. It is identical to the "kingdom of God" (19:23–24). This kingdom exists now among believers, as God rules over their hearts (Luke 17:21). However, one day the kingdom of heaven will be established in a literal earthly kingdom (Rev 20:4–6). From the beginning God designed mankind to rule over the earth (Gen 1:28). But Adam failed (Gen 3), so some future human king would need to do the job. This king is a human descendant of Abraham (Gen 17:6), Judah (49:10), and David (2 Sam 7:13–16). But He is also God (Zech 14:9) and the Son of God (Ps 2:7–12). He will rule from Jerusalem (Ps 132:13–18; Zech 14:8), but His reign will be over the whole earth (Ps 72:8–11, 17; Dan 2:35, 44). His kingdom will be a time of peace and righteousness (Ps 72:1–4; Isa

9:6–7), joy and prosperity (Ps 144:9–15; Isa 65:17–25). It will be both spiritual and physical, when Israel is cleansed from sin and restored to her land forever (Ezek 37:21–28).

But how was the kingdom "at hand" or "near" (Matt 3:2), if even today we are still waiting for the kingdom? The kingdom was close, and it would have come quickly if the Jews had accepted John the Baptist as the coming Elijah. John the Baptist was not the literal, resurrected Elijah, as he himself testified (John 1:21), but he was the Elijah that Malachi the prophet predicted would come (Luke 1:17). Jesus explained, "If you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come" (Matt 11:14). But since the Jews were not willing to accept John or his message, the kingdom was delayed. So there is still an Elijah to come to prepare the way for Christ's second coming. At that time, the kingdom that was so near will finally arrive.

THINK ABOUT IT

If Jesus returned today, would He find in you a heart willing to receive Him?



Repent by turning away from sin (3:5–10)

Do not miss John's message: to get into the kingdom, you must repent. But what is repentance? **Repentance** means to turn away from sin and toward God (Isa 55:7). It is a radical change of your mind, emotions, and will. First, with your mind you must confess your sin (1 John 1:9), like those being baptized at the Jordan (Matt 3:6). **Confessing** sin means agreeing with God about your sin. Second, with your emotions you must be saddened by your sin (Jas 4:9–10), which John's humble clothing illustrated (Matt 3:4). This "godly grief" is a gift from the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 2:25). It is different than "worldly grief," since godly grief weeps over how terrible sin is to God, but worldly grief is just sad about the painful consequences of sin (2 Cor 7:10; cf. Matt 27:3–5). Third, with your will you must firmly reject sin and choose to do what is right (Isa 1:16–17). If you do, your behavior will be consistent with your repentant heart (Matt 3:8). It is not that good behavior makes up for sin or earns forgiveness. Rather, it is external evidence of an internal change (Jas 2:14–26).

STUDY THE BIBLE LESSON

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Because a changed heart always produces a changed life, John rebuked the Pharisees and Sadducees for not truly changing (Matt 3:7). Genuine repentance always produces “fruit,” but there was no fruit in their lives (3:8; cf. Jas 2:17; 1 John 3:7; 4:20). They thought they were ok without fruit because they were descendants of Abraham (Matt 3:9). So John’s baptism would have been very strange for them. It was completely different from their ceremonial washings. In fact, the only one-time washing the Jews accepted was for Gentiles who wanted to convert to Judaism. For Jews to be baptized like this was to admit that they needed forgiveness just as much as a Gentile! It was admitting that being a member of God’s chosen race—a physical descendant

of Abraham—did not automatically save them. So if you want to enter the kingdom, do not depend on your family background (John 1:13). Admit your failure (Rom 3:10–11), and seek forgiveness by receiving your King with a repentant heart.



THINK ABOUT IT
Truly repent by loving to live in a way that honors your King.

So repent quickly and bow before Jesus the King. Even though His kingdom was delayed, John’s message applies right now. In fact, God delayed the kingdom on purpose to provide a way for you to be forgiven (Isa 53:3–5; Dan 9:26) and a chance for you to repent and be saved (Rom 11:11; 2 Pet 3:9). Then, once you have repented, have hope. God hasn’t given up His kingdom plan. This world is broken, but one day King Jesus will reign for 1,000 years to finish the job God gave Adam (Rev 20:4; 1 Cor 15:24). After that, He will make a new heaven and new earth, where everyone who repents will reign with Him forever (Rev 22:5). Until then, live as a citizen of the kingdom (Phil 3:20). Be ready to enter the kingdom (Matt 25:1–12) and store up in the kingdom the greatest reward possible (25:15–29). Do this by living out kingdom principles (Matt 5–7) in submission to the King (Luke 19:12–27). And as a servant of the King, go out and bring many others into the kingdom with you (Matt 22:9).



THINK ABOUT IT
Like John the Baptist, confess that you are not even worthy to serve as Jesus’ lowest slave (3:11)!

Repent because Christ is great (3:11–12)

Is such radical change worth the effort? Yes, because Jesus is worth it. He is the great King. He is the “Lord” (3:3), which means He is God (Isa 40:3). He shows this by baptizing with a baptism much greater than John’s (Matt 3:11). First, Jesus *baptizes* believers by *immersing* them in the Holy Spirit. This is such a blessing, because the Holy Spirit unites believers to Jesus (1 Cor 12:13) and causes them to be full of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22–23). Second, Jesus will baptize unbelievers in fire, which means that those who refuse to repent will suffer forever in the lake of fire (Matt 3:12; cf. Rev 20:15; 21:8).

Lesson Outline

Repent in order to enter Christ's kingdom.

AGES 3–5 LESSON OUTLINE



1. Repent to enter Christ's kingdom (3:1–4).
2. Repent by turning away from sin (3:5–10).
3. Repent because Christ will save or destroy (3:11–12).

AGES 6–11 LESSON OUTLINE



1. Repent to enter Christ's kingdom (3:1–4).

- John was preparing for the coming kingdom (3:1).
- John preached a message of repentance (3:2).
- John was the promised “Elijah” sent to announce the King’s coming (3:3–4).

2. Repent by turning away from sin (3:5–10)

- John baptized many as they confessed their sins (3:5–6).
- John challenged the religious leaders to live out their repentance (3:7–8).
- John warned them not to trust in their physical heritage (3:9–10).

3. Repent because Christ is King (3:11–12).

- Jesus is far more powerful and more worthy than John (3:11a).
- Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire (3:11b).
- Jesus saves the repentant and burns the unrepentant forever (3:12).



TEACH THE BIBLE LESSON

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Lesson Questions

Use these questions to teach or to review this week's lesson.



Ages 3–5 Lesson Questions

1. **Who was the special messenger who prepared the way for Jesus?**
John the Baptist.
2. **What did John the Baptist tell people to do?**
Repent.
3. **What does it mean to repent?**
To turn away from sin and turn toward God.
4. **What happens to those who do not repent?**
Jesus sends them to be punished in the lake of fire forever.



Ages 6–11 Lesson Questions

1. **What did John say was coming very soon?**
The kingdom of heaven.
2. **What is the kingdom of heaven?**
It is the realm of God's rule over those who belong to Him. This is always true, but one day Jesus will also physically reign on earth (Rev 20:4–6).
3. **Why didn't God's kingdom come to earth in John's time?**
Because the Jews rejected their King.
4. **What did many people do to show their repentance?**
They were baptized. This was a way for them to admit that they were unworthy sinners.
5. **What did John the Baptist wear and eat, and why?**
He wore camel's hair and a leather belt. He ate locusts and honey. This showed he was the promised Elijah.
6. **Besides confession and sadness, what else is part of repentance?**
A desire and choice to turn from sin and do what is right. This is seen through changed behavior.
7. **What did John say about Jesus' sandals, and why?**
John said he wasn't worthy to carry Jesus' sandals (Matt 3:11). Since that was a job for the lowest slave, that shows how great Jesus is.
8. **What does Jesus do for those who repent?**
He baptizes them in the Holy Spirit, saves them from hell, and lets them into His kingdom.

Lesson Activities

Choose from the following ideas to introduce, illustrate, and apply this week's lesson.

AGES 3–5



INTRODUCE

HOW TO TREAT A KING

Ask the children how they should treat the following groups of people: parents, teachers, and police officers. Is it a good idea to disobey your parents or teachers? What about acting silly around a police officer? Since all these individuals are in charge, how should children treat them? If you show this kind of obedience to regular people, what kind of obedience does Jesus deserve? In our story today, John the Baptist says that Jesus is the great King. Because of that, we must obey His command to repent and honor Him.

READY FOR THE KING

John the Baptist came to prepare the people for the King. If your classroom allows, you can teach the lesson by having the children help you prepare a dinner table for an important and very special guest. Have the children sit around the table and explain the ministry of John the Baptist to them. He didn't instruct people to make sure their homes and their tables were ready, but he came to make sure that their hearts were ready. End the lesson by explaining to the children how they must be ready for Christ when He comes again.



ILLUSTRATE

VISUAL AIDS

This story includes lots of concrete visuals. Bring in props (some real, some pretend) to illustrate as you tell the story: coarse garment, leather belt, grasshopper, honey, water (with toy person to baptize in it), rubber snake, fruit, stone, pretend axe, tree (or smaller plant), sandal, pitchfork, straw/chaff, grain, etc.

WHO IS YOUR DAD?

As you teach throughout the story, use props to illustrate major aspects or events. For example, a baby bottle can be used to illustrate Hannah raising Samuel until he was weaned. Baby clothing of various sizes could be used to illustrate that Hannah would bring Samuel clothes every year. A pillow could be used to illustrate that God spoke to Samuel as he was lying down. A thin sheet of metal or a cookie sheet could be used to make thunder sound effects by shaking or striking a thin sheet of metal while reading about God's thunder in 1 Samuel 7:10.



APPLY

JOHN PREPARES THE WAY

See Year 3 Craft Book, Book 1.

Materials: Craft sheets, cardstock, glue, scissors, and crayons.

Directions: Have students cut out picture and verse from craft sheets. Children should then color the picture. Glue the picture and verse to a piece of blue cardstock. Draw some lines on the cardstock beneath the picture to make it look like waves.

John Prepares the Way
See Year 3 Craft Book, Book 1.



TEACH THE BIBLE LESSON

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AGES 6–8



INTRODUCE

ONLY CHILDREN

Ask the children what they call the parents of their parents (grandparents). What about the parents of their grandparents (great-grandparents)? What do their grandparents and great-grandparents call them (grandchildren, great-grandchildren)? Then ask the children: Does God have grandchildren? No, only children. Explain that you cannot enter God's family just because your parents are children of God. You can only enter God's family if you yourself become a child of God. In today's story, John the Baptist tells us how we can enter God's family.

PREPARING FOR A GUEST

What do families do when expecting a visit from a guest? They prepare! Our moms might cook dinner, while we begin to clean up the house. We do these things to make sure the house is completely ready for company. This is similar to what the prophet John did before the arrival of Christ, only he was preparing hearts, not homes. The nation of Israel had turned their hearts away from God; they were not ready for their long awaited King. In order to prepare the people for the Lord, John the Baptist came preaching a message of repentance in order that the people might turn their hearts to God.



ILLUSTRATE

WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT AND FIRE

John declared that Christ would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matt 3:11). What does someone look like who has been baptized in the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13)? They look like Christ. We cannot see the Holy Spirit, but we can see whether someone has been baptized in the Spirit by the effect it produces. Such a person will demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23). What does someone who has been baptized in fire look like? Bring a log which has been charred in the fire to show the children. Baptism in fire describes how the unrepentant will suffer eternal punishment in the lake of fire.

DO NOT JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER

To illustrate the concept "fruit of repentance," set out several items (apple, bar of soap, and sponge). Label the items incorrectly, and ask the children how they can be sure that they know what each item is (an apple tastes sweet, etc.). These characteristics are the fruit (evidence) of what it is. The Pharisees and Sadducees had no evidence of repentance. Because they lacked the fruit of repentance, John knew they had rejected Christ as their King.



APPLY

JOHN'S MESSAGE AND WORD PICTURES

See Year 3 Craft Book, Book 1.

Materials: Craft sheets, glue, scissors, and crayons.

Directions: Distribute the craft sheet with the pictures on it. Have the students color the pictures and then cut them out. Distribute the craft sheet with six boxes that contain questions. Have the students glue their pictures to the appropriate place on the craft sheet. Note: this is best used as a craft to review that lesson that has just been taught.

John's Message and Word Pictures
See Year3 Craft Book, Book 1.



AGES 9–11



INTRODUCE

HOST CITY

How does a city prepare to host the Olympics? They repair and widen the roads and bridges. They might even build new ones. They build fancy new buildings for all the events (show some pictures on PowerPoint of buildings built for the Olympics). They upgrade the entire city to make it look as attractive as possible. God sent John the Baptist to prepare for something much greater than the Olympics. John was sent to prepare for the kingdom of heaven! Let's see what John the Baptist did to prepare Israel for the kingdom.

DEAD OR ALIVE

Bring to class two plants. One of the plants should be dead (fruitless, mangled, discolored, etc.) and the other should be alive (full of fruit, healthy, green, etc.). Have the children make observations about the plants. Take this time to note how John was able to discern the spiritual status of the Pharisees and Sadducees. John was able to tell that they were not genuinely repentant because their lives did not show it. They neither feared God nor His judgment and, because of this, were not worthy of being baptized.



ILLUSTRATE

ILLUSTRATIONS OF JUDGMENT

Use John's own illustrations of judgment. The unrepentant are like unfruitful trees (Matt 3:10), which are only good for firewood. Farmers cut them down to make room for fruitful trees. The unrepentant are like chaff (3:12). At harvest, oxen pulled heavy boards over the heads of grain to crush them and separate the husks (chaff) from the kernels of grain. Then farmers tossed it all into the air with a winnowing fork, allowing the wind to blow away the light chaff while the heavier grains fell back to the ground. The dry chaff could be burned up quickly, but the grain was stored in barns. So those who refuse to repent will be cut down, separated out, and burned forever in the lake of fire (Rev 20:15; 21:8).

MISPLACED CONFIDENCE

Ask the children to imagine that they are standing before Christ. Then ask them the following question: What makes you worthy to enter Christ's kingdom? Explain that nothing but the righteousness of Christ (2 Cor 5:21) can make us acceptable to God. As John the Baptist warned the Pharisees and Sadducees, Christian family members cannot save us from God's judgment (Matt 3:9). We must personally repent of our sins and ask Jesus to save us.



APPLY

WHAT DOES REPENTANCE LOOK LIKE?

In Luke's account of John the Baptist's ministry, John gives several examples of the fruit of repentance. If someone has two shirts, what should they do (Luke 3:11)? What should tax collectors do (3:12–13)? What should soldiers do (3:14)? Look up the verses to answer the questions. What does repentance look like in your life? Think about your roles in life: as a child, a friend, a student, or a brother or sister.