

# Sons from Stones

Matthew 3:1-12

27 July 2003

## Introduction

In Matthew's gospel, we have seen how Matthew presents Jesus as the King of the Jews, the Messiah whom God had promised.

In chapter 1,

- he showed that He was the Son of David...
- then (in the second part of the chapter) he presented His miraculous birth of a Virgin.

In chapter 2,

- he shows us the homage that was paid to Him by the Magi who worshipped Him as the king of the Jews.
- and He shows us how even in His childhood He began to suffer in fulfilment of all that the prophets had said.

Now in chapter 3,

- We are introduced to the king's herald—John the Baptist.
- When a king was coming to a country in those days,
  - his herald would go ahead of him to prepare the way.
  - Two things were done by the herald:
    - He would proclaim that the king was coming
    - He would prepare the road—levelling it, filling the pot-holes filled, and removing stones and rubbish.

John was the herald, prophesied by Isaiah, Malachi, and Zacharias,

- who went before the LORD Jesus Christ to prepare the people for His coming.

Although John spoke in particular to prepare the covenant people for that special time when He was manifest to Israel to set up His kingdom...

- The things John said also apply to you when His kingdom—
  - which has now been set up in the world—
  - is proclaimed to you in the gospel.
- Here is counsel for all who are called into His kingdom by the gospel.
  - Here you are instructed about how to get in step with this king and all that He came to do and is doing in the world.

- Surely it would not do to have any of you stand in opposition to this King,
  - to live in this, His universe, over which He has all authority and be out of step with His agenda!
- To do so would be to miss all the wonderful blessing that is to be found in His kingdom...
  - and to stir up His anger so as to bring upon yourself the most intolerable judgement.

**I. I want to begin by showing you where you were when you first heard the voice of Christ's herald, announcing King Jesus and His kingdom.**

**A. You were in the wilderness!**

1. The wilderness is the place death and barrenness.
  - a. The wilderness where John was a place of rolling, desolate hills,
    - a vast expanse of chalky soil covered with pebbles, broken stones, and rocks.
    - Here and there, a bit of brushwood could be found, often infested with snakes.
  - b. The wilderness is not a place of life and fruitfulness,
    - of gardens and cultivated fields.
2. The wilderness is the place where God's people, Israel, were when King Jesus came into the world.
  - a. They were a veritable desert!
    - There may have been a bit of brushwood here and there,
    - but over all, there was death and barrenness.
  - b. Very little fruit could be found—
    - Their hearts were barren and cold
      - there was little love for God, little concern for His ways, little fear of God, little true worship...
      - but lots of hypocrisy, complaining, blasphemy, corruption, and cursing.
    - There was little love for neighbour—
      - but rather selfishness, bitterness, gossip, greed, extortion, anger, immorality, neglect of the poor, and dishonour of parents.

- c. It was no accident that John preached in the wilderness!
  - 1) His wilderness life was deliberate—it was a part of his message!
    - The prophets often taught not only by words, but also by their lifestyle.
    - John was like Elijah...
      - He wore the rough, crude clothing of the wilderness—a tunic of camel’s hair and a leather belt.
      - and subsisted on wildness food—locusts and wild honey.
  - 2) Like Elijah, John did not do this to try to make himself holy—
    - as if wearing rough clothes and eating crude food would somehow gain favour with God...
    - He did this to show God’s people that **they** were in the wilderness—
      - That they were dead and barren...
      - That they had no fruit acceptable to God.
- 3. And I want to say to all of you, that apart from the grace of God, you are all in the wilderness too!
  - The Bible declares plainly that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, there is none good, no not one!
    - It says that apart from Christ, we are dead in trespasses and sins.
    - It says that before Christ, we were barren and unfruitful.
    - It says that together they have become unprofitable.

B. But here is a marvellous thing—

- the voice of Christ’s herald is **heard** in the wilderness!

No matter who you are,

- if you have ever heard the gospel that announces Christ’s kingdom,
  - the voice met you when were a spiritual wilderness—barren
  - The gospel finds everyone in this condition, and comes to them to wake them up to life!
- It may have come to you in your earliest days as a covenant child at your baptism—
  - but you were a veritable wilderness apart from Christ.
- It may have come to you after years of riotous living—
  - it may have arrested and stopped you in your tracks to set you on a new way...

- Of it may have come to you after years of hypocrisy, pretending to yourself and others that you were full of life and fruitfulness...
- the voice came and broke down all your pretences...

But what is amazing about this voice is that it is heard *in the wilderness!*

- a. It is amazing that King Jesus should bring such a voice to barren souls!
    - 1) When Isaiah told Israel that this voice would come, he was speaking great words of comfort to them!
      - He said, “‘Comfort yes comfort my people,’ says your God, ‘and speak comfortably to Jerusalem!’”
      - What an amazing thing: that King Jesus would send His herald to a rebellious people who were dead and barren and without fruit!
        - That He would send the herald to prepare **them** for His coming!
    - 2) What love and grace that He should continue to speak to such a people,
      - to stretch out His hand to them call them to prepare for His kingdom!
  - b. And how wonderful that His voice should be heard by them!
    - 1) How is it that the dead and barren should hear?
      - They are dead!
        - The herald can come and preach and preach and preach, but what good will it do?
        - Can the dead serve a king?
    - 2) Indeed they can!
      - Jesus told us in John 5:25 how it is so:
        - “Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself.”
- a) The word of God whether spoken by John or another of Christ’s servants, actually gives life to the dead—
    - It actually causes the dead to rise and follow—
    - It gives what it commands—
      - The blind to see—
      - The deaf to hear.
      - The lame walk.

- b) It breaks into all that death and barrenness with powerful efficacy!
  - Do you remember what God told Ezekiel to do in Ezekiel 37?
  - He was to go out and preach in the wilderness—in a graveyard!
    - The LORD said,
      - “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.’”
      - Then God makes the bones arise and live...
  - And most graciously, He tells Ezekiel to tell His people:
    - “I will put my Spirit in you, and you shall live... then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and performed it.”
- c) The word actually produces what it commands!
  - The grace of God accompanies the voice and causes deaf ears to hear and dead hearts to respond.
  - Matthew 3:5 shows that there were many who heard!
    - “Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan went out to him...”
  - The voice was heard by the dead!

And let me ask you—have you heard the voice of the gospel?

It is a great privilege that God should tell you about Christ.

- There are some that will never hear!
- Even if you have not truly believed, it is by God’s grace that you have heard at all—
  - and all the more so to whatever degree there has been some convincing and persuading of the truth in you.

But woe to you if He has graciously spoken and you have not obeyed!

- It is far worse to hear your Master’s will and not do it than it is to have never heard at all!
  - For now you have added to all your other sins the sin of rejecting the gracious voice of God, calling you to King Jesus!
- Do not let another day go by without obeying the voice of God’s call.
  - The opportunity may not last.
  - Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your heart!

## II. Consider what this voice says...

### A. It says, "Prepare the way of the LORD."

1. John called the people to prepare because "The kingdom of heaven is at hand!"
  - a. John had the privilege of telling the people in the wilderness that Jehovah Himself was coming to establish His kingdom!
  - b. John was proclaiming that Jehovah Himself was coming!
    - He is the One who has life in Himself and who gives life and breath to all things that live.
    - He is the One who ultimately blesses or curses!
      - Everything that has to do with you is in His hands!
      - John said:
        - "He is coming to establish His rule—His empire—His kingdom among the sons of men!"
        - "Get ready for Jehovah to come! His kingdom is at hand!"
2. Now of course this was not just any old kingdom that John suddenly starts talking about out of nowhere—
  - a. It is the kingdom that God had promised all through the ages, especially to His people Israel.
    - It is the kingdom that Daniel spoke about that would encompass the whole earth and would never be destroyed!
    - It is the kingdom that all the prophets spoke about in which God would establish a people under His gracious rule once again!
  - b. Beloved, this kingdom is the opposite of the wilderness!
    - 1) It is a place where there is life and fruitfulness instead of death and barrenness!
      - It is a kingdom in which fallen men and women are reconciled to the living God—
      - Where they are enabled to live beautifully and gloriously with Him!
        - Life is ugly without God—
          - It is a wilderness, it is death, it is barren and unfruitful!
        - But King Jesus makes all things new—
          - He brings life and fruitfulness to His willing subjects!
    - 2) At first, His kingdom is remedial—

- As long as we live in this world, He must teach us to bear fruit for His name.
- He calls us to follow Him and to learn to observe all that He has commanded.
- He calls us to die to the old way of living and put on the new way that He brings.
- The soil of the human heart is stubborn and hard,
  - there are weeds and thorns to contend with—
    - it is with much tribulation that we inherit the kingdom...
    - but what a blessing that there is the promise of life and fruit!

TRANS> At first the kingdom is remedial...

- 3) But then, after the suffering and the struggle, there is the everlasting enjoying of the fruit!
  - In Heaven, the harvest is gathered in and all the chaff is taken away.
    - Then all those fruits that were cultivated here on earth are enjoyed forever!
    - The grain that was grown is made into bread to be enjoyed!
  - Heaven will be a world of love where God's will is done and no other!

TRANS> But the voice calls us to prepare for this kingdom...

## B. How do you prepare?

1. You must remove every obstacle from the King's path.
  - a. Do you remember what I said that a herald's two-fold task was?
    - 1) He was **to proclaim** and **to prepare** the road.
    - 2) When Isaiah said:
      - "Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill made low,"
      - He was talking about a road crew that goes out to prepare the road for the king's travel...
        - The valley's that are exalted are pot holes and gullies that are to be filled,
        - and the mountains that are made low are the bumps and stones that must be removed to make the way smooth and clear.

- b. Of course the preparation of the LORD's way that John (and Isaiah) had in view was not the removal of stones and the filling of holes,
  - It was the removal of those obstructions in our life that are in the LORD's way.
  - Not that the LORD's hand is shortened that He cannot save...
    - But that our iniquities have separated us from Him and must be taken out of the way.

TRANS> And so John tells his hearers what they must do to prepare the way of the LORD.

- And John's words apply to you today—
  - with the only difference that now the voice announces His kingdom that has already established,
  - rather than His kingdom that is about to be established by His crucifixion and resurrection.

2. The voice calls you to repent...

- Verse 2 says, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."
- a. **Repent** literally means to change your mind about something.
  - 1) The word itself can be used in very mundane ways—such as when someone changes his mind about what to have supper.
    - But in the Bible has a very specialised use that is loaded with meaning!
  - 2) It speaks of a radical change of mind about the direction of your whole life!
    - Namely, a change from a person who is reconciled with his sin to a person who has turned against his sin.
  - 3) And I don't just mean with certain sins—
    - A drunk may not want to remain a drunk...
    - A lazy person might want to be free from laziness...
    - And a person with a bad temper may desire to have more control.
    - But the repentance that John is talking about is something much more than that!
      - It is a change of mind about **sin**—
        - sin as rebellion against God, not as merely inconvenient!
        - Repentance is an entire heart and life change with reference to God!



- b. If you have repented, you want to be holy.
- You have a different goal and desire and mind than the people around you who have not repented.
- 1) They have their goals—they want to be popular, rich, sexually aroused, happy, important, respected, honoured, understood, loved, fulfilled, etc...
    - but if you have repented, you want to be holy,
      - you want to be shaped by God's will,
      - you want to reflect His glory by living with Him as the centre of your life.
  - 2) And it is not just that you want this holiness in order to be respected or accepted or fulfilled or happy or honoured!
    - In other words, it is not that you come to God to gain something else like fulfilment or happiness or honour...
      - as if those things are greater than God!
    - You come rather to participate and share in the glory of God Himself...
      - Your mind is changed in that you are now attracted to God Himself rather than only His gifts.
      - Your whole agenda is to embrace the King of glory in all of life;
        - and your greatest sorrow is that you have not done this.
- c. The repentance that John speaks of here is something that you either have or don't have.
- 1) In other words, once you have repented, you do not need to do it again because it is a complete re-orientation of your life's direction.
    - In the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus speaks of 99 just persons who need no repentance.
      - He does not mean that they never needed to repent;
        - He means that they have already repented and continuing in that repentance.
      - They have had that change of mind and therefore are a new creation—
        - one who has been crucified with Christ and now lives for Him.
  - 2) This does not mean, however, that such persons do not need to repent of their particular sins!

- Quite the contrary!
  - If you have repented and had this radical change of mind that John is calling for here—a whole new attitude about sin...
  - Then you have entered a life of continual repentance!
- Do you see the point?
  - It is like changing sides in a war.
    - Before you were on sin's side...
      - You were fighting against holiness,
    - But when you repented you began to fight against sin.
- That certainly does not mean there is no more battle!
  - Nor does it mean that sin never overtakes you!
    - What it means is that sin is now your enemy and you are set against it!
  - Sometimes it deceives you, catches you in weakness, lays hold of you, takes you prisoner—
    - but even if you are a prisoner of war for a time,
      - you are still in the opposing army—
      - It does not mean that you have defected to the other side.

TRANS> So the voice counsels you to repent—and by God's grace, the voice actually brings about repentance!

### 3. Besides repentance, you are counselled to prepare by being baptised.

Baptism is a ceremonial washing with water.

- In it, God sets forth visibly and seals His promise to wash away your sin by the virtue of Jesus Christ.
  - This goes hand in hand with repentance!
  - You have turned against sin, so you look to God to cleanse you from it!

In baptism there is a confession of sin that accompanies it (as verse 6 shows).

- You must confess that you are dirty and defiled by sin and need to be washed and that you want to be washed!

In fact, in baptism you submit to the Lord to be washed!

- Now I have already shown you that this washing away of sin to make you fruitful is the whole purpose of Christ's kingdom...

- So you see that you prepare for Him by getting yourself in step with what He came to do.

You come to King Jesus and say:

- “I am a barren desert, but I have heard that in your kingdom you can cause dead souls to live and bring forth fruit.
- I come to you at your call to be cleansed—wash me and make me fruitful, and I shall live.

TRANS> So you see that John prepared people for Christ’s kingdom by calling them to repentance and by baptising those that were ready to confess their need.

### **III. This preparation is so important**

A. Do you see why it is so important?

1. If you haven’t had this change of mind about your sin, then you stand in opposition to everything that King Jesus came to do!

- You are not prepared to enter His kingdom!
  - a. Do you remember what the angel told Joseph about Him?
    - Matthew 1:21: “You shall call Him Jesus because He will save His people from their sin.”
  - b. That is what this gracious king came to do!
    - He came to bring you from the wilderness where you are dead because you are alienated from the life of God and the glory of God...
      - to His kingdom where you are reconciled to God and full of fruit!
      - The person who has repented is craving these fruits of holiness.

2. The opposite of repentance is the attitude that says:

- “I don’t need to turn, I am fine as I am!”
  - a. The Pharisees and Sadducees were like that.
    - 1) John really lashed out at them when they came to his baptism!
      - They were used to their pretty titles like “Rabbi” and “Father,”
        - but John has a new title for them!
        - He calls them a brood of vipers!
      - Understand, coming to John’s baptism was not the same as coming to be baptised!

- They were coming to see what was going on, but Luke tells us plainly that they did not receive baptism!
  - Luke 7:29-30: And when all the people heard *Him*, even the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the will of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.
- 2) Not only does John call them vipers, he also lumps them together as if they are one in the same—they are one brood!
- Yet, in their minds, they were polar opposites!
    - a) The Pharisees were like Roman Catholics today.
      - They were conservative, believed in heaven and hell, held to high moral standards, believed the Bible to be the word of God, held rigidly to the traditions of their fathers, and were full of rituals and ceremonies they had developed to bring them nearer to God.
      - They were ritualists and legalists.
    - b) The Sadducees were like the United Church or some other liberal denomination.
      - They rejected parts of the Bible, denied the resurrection and the soul, were often corrupt in their moral standards, and promoted man’s freedom over against God’s sovereignty.
      - If they Pharisees were ritualists, the Sadducees were rationalists.
    - c) But John lumps them together because they had this in common:
      - Both trusted in themselves and what they could perform or accomplish by their own actions and wills.
        - They were hypocrites because they pretended that they were righteous instead of repenting of their sin.
        - They pretended that they could bear fruit without a Saviour.
      - Such person cannot get in step with Jesus and what He came to do because they have never really turned against sin—
        - Instead, they are busy trying to justify themselves.
        - They say to themselves,
          - “I don’t need to repent and look to Jesus to cleanse me...
          - I am already a good person.”
- b. John tells them that he knows they have not repented because of their fruit!
- 1) In verse 8, he says, “Bear fruits worthy of repentance.”

- Actually, the original is singular—“bear **fruit** worthy of repentance.”
- Their fruit as a whole is corrupt—
  - It is corrupt because all their fine deeds are the fruits of hypocrisy instead of the fruits of repentance.

2) John knows that these men have corrupt lives and corrupt hearts...

- Though they pretend otherwise to the point of deceiving themselves and others, the corruption is there and with it the bad fruit is there.
- John is beginning to do what Jesus will do even more—
  - He is exposing the barrenness in these men’s lives that they refuse to admit.

3) Surely his words stung their hearts through all the layers of hypocrisy!

- Why else did they lash out against Jesus if it were not so?
- Beloved, don’t resist the word of God and the will of God like these men did!
  - Change your mind about your sin—
  - Instead of pretending that you are righteous, turn against your sin and get in step with Jesus and what He came to do!
  - When you do, you will start bringing forth fruits of repentance instead of fruits of hypocrisy!

B. Beware! Hypocrites have practised all their lives fashioning excuses for themselves as to why they don’t need to repent!

1. There are many examples, but John puts his finger on one of the most deadly ones that has brought many to Hell!

- Namely, covenant presumption!

a. He explains it in verse 9!

- Matthew 3:9: “and do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as *our* father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.”
- It is true that they were born into God’s covenant...
  - The promise to Abraham was to him and his seed—that God would be their God and that they would be His people.
  - And indeed, they were His people by virtue of the covenant, but that did not mean they did not need repentance!

- It might well mean that they could not remember when they first repented—
    - but it certainly did not mean that they did not need to be at war with their sin,
      - looking to God’s promise to deliver them from it!
      - So long as they were on this side of the grave, the battle against sin and the grief of sin would go on if repentance was there.
- c. Covenant presumption is still very common today, though it occurs in many different forms...
- one says to Himself,
    - “I don’t need to repent because I am a member of the church.”
  - another says, “because I was baptised.”
  - another, “because I went forward at the crusade.”
  - another, “because I was born into a Christian family.”
  - another, “because I prayed the sinner’s prayer.”
2. But I want you to see how utterly foolish covenant presumption is!
- a. If you are in covenant with God—however it may have come about—
- whether you were born into a covenant family or if you left the Hell’s Angels at a revival meeting—
  - it is utterly foolish for you to suppose that you are right with God if there is no repentance.
- b. The covenant teaches you to turn against your sin and come to Christ to be cleansed from it!
- Do you see what I am saying?
    - The privilege of your covenant connection to Him is that you have been introduced to the One who came to save His people from their sins.
    - So how is it that you who have been brought face to face with him are not trusting Him to take away your sins and make you fruitful?
      - Why else were you joined to Him in His covenant if not for this?
- C. If this is the case with you, it means that you have dared to come into the kingdom, with some other agenda than His agenda!
1. You are at cross-purposes with Jesus Christ and John tells you what will happen to you!
- READ> v. 10

- a. You are not bearing fruit because you did not come into the kingdom to bear fruit.
    - You came for some other purpose—
    - And the final result will be, if there is no repentance, that you will be cast into the fire.
      - I did not make that up—Christ’s herald says that!
        - “every three which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire!”
        - There it is!
  - b. Think about it—
    - Here is an orchard.
      - The farmer has gone to great sacrifice to plant his trees...
      - But he finds a tree with no fruit that is worth eating—right in the middle of his orchard!
      - Why is that tree there?
        - It will only steal nutrients from the other trees.
        - He fertilises and waters and cares for the tree, but still there is no fruit.
          - Why did it come into a kingdom which kingdom’s purpose is to bear fruit for God?
          - The farmer will cut it down and burn it!
      - Let the tree protest and say,
        - “But I am a part of the king’s orchard! You cannot cut me down.”
      - The farmer will say,
        - “Yes I can—the trees in this orchard are here to bear fruit for me—
          - You have come for some other purpose and you do not belong here!
          - Depart from me, I never knew you!”
2. But brethren, there is encouragement that follows this dreadful verse!
- Not for you if you do not repent, but if you do!
  - a. You who really do want to bear fruit—perhaps you are saying,
    - But how can I bear fruit?
    - I find no strength to bear fruit.
    - What can I do?

- c. Look to the One who is mightier than John!
  - 3) John says that He is not even worthy to carry his shoes—
    - a job that not disciple was expected to do for his master because it was too lowly—
    - John says, I am not even worthy to do that for Him!
  - 4) This is Jehovah, the One that John points everyone to—
    - He is the King who comes to establish His kingdom of fruit-bearers out of those who are barren and dead.
    - He is able to do what John or any other minister of the word can't even think about doing!
  - 5) John says that He baptises with the Holy Spirit!
    - b) And brethren, baptism is about cleansing—about washing!
      - Jesus does effectively and inwardly what is symbolised outwardly in baptism with water.
    - c) Jesus shed His blood to take away our guilt, and when Jesus baptises you with the Spirit, the Spirit applies His shed blood to cleanse your guilty conscience—
      - Not just so that you feel better—
      - But so that God's holy anger against your sin is appeased!
      - The sword of His anger has already pierced Jesus and now you are cleansed from all your guilt when the Spirit applies this to you!
    - d) And secondly, the Spirit cleanses you from your corruption...
      - Yes, if you have come to Jesus because you despise your sin and want to be free of it, here is the good news!
        - When Jesus baptises you with the Spirit, the Spirit gives you a new heart and begins to work in you so that you are enabled to bring forth fruit!
        - It is not something the dead wilderness can do—
          - but it is something the Spirit of God can do!
          - It is a baptism of fire that burns away the corruption in your heart and replaces it with fruit day by day!
- d. As it says at the end of verse 9, God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones!



- 1) This is good news for stones—good news for you if you know that you are a wilderness, dead and barren as a stone.
  - This is what God makes His sons out of!
  - It is from stones that Jesus gets fruit!
  
- 2) Do you see how John portrays Him?
  - a) There He is at His threshing floor with His winnowing fan in His hand!
    - The farmers in those days would put their grain on a hard threshing floor and their oxen would trample on it to separate the grain from the stalk or the chaff.
    - Then they would throw it up into the wind so that the chaff was blown away, leaving the wheat behind.
  
  - b) Jesus' threshing floor is the visible church.
    - There is both grain and chaff, but He will separate them...
      - just as He did when He came into the world and called disciples to Himself, bringing judgement on those who rejected Him in 70 AD.
  
  - c) And here the sweet words—
    - He will gather His wheat into the barn!
      - What incentive there is be fruit for Him!
      - To be His and to be gathered for His use forever!
      - On this side of the grave, the fruit and the grain are produced by those who would be dead apart from His grace!
        - Then we are gathered in to His granary where we will be used for His enjoyment forever!
  
  - d) But not so the chaff—
    - The chaff will be burned up with unquenchable fire.
    - Terrible words—
      - Burned up in that the judgement will complete—
      - unquenchable in that the judgement will remain forever.

## **Conclusion**

This you are told that you might flee from the wrath to come!

- And why would you not?
- Here the king of glory has come to make fruit-bearers out of dead stones in the wilderness of sin!
  - How could you refuse so great a salvation?