

## The Kingdom Is At Hand!

Valley Center February 9, 2008

What a beautiful scene to witness, as those who have decided to follow Jesus confirm their choice by obeying His command to be baptized! It's only because of the limitations of our human condition that we can't hear the songs of joy expressed by the hosts above.

When Jesus washed the disciples' feet, He said to them, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this." John 13:7. I believe this Scripture speaks today. I believe it has meaning to the things that He brings into our lives, including the desire to follow Him in baptism. Jesus speaks to our hearts through His Spirit and leads us to a understanding of the principles of His kingdom and what lies ahead, but there is so much more He has to share with us, both in this life, and in the life to come. Today we cannot comprehend completely the significance of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. We have such a limited perspective of the privilege of being a part of the family of heaven, and what it means to be a Christian.

When the sky is rolled back and our eyes see the King in His beauty, we'll begin to fathom more of what this is about. When you meet your tall and magnificent angel who has been your unseen guardian throughout your lifetime, when you hear the Lord say, "Come and inherit the Kingdom prepared for you," when you walk through those gigantic gates made of solid pearl, when you meet and embrace those you've known here or heard about here, then it will begin to "sink in" and your joy will grow and know no limits.

The awesome significance of what it means to make a decision for Jesus, to declare to the world that you have accepted His salvation and His plan for your life is something that will continue to develop through eternity. In heaven, and in the New Earth, we'll reflect on the stages of our lives, and glory in the

miracle of how He reached out and touched us, how He patiently guided us, how He continuously protected us and led us into deeper understandings of His will.

Some of these things we know about today, but for every thing that we know, there will be a thousand that will be revealed to us later. We will not be able to restrain our lips from shouting "Glory to God" as we learn more and more of the operation of His kindly grace in our lives.

Let's read from the book of Matthew. "In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!' 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.'" And John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locust and wild honey." Matthew 3:1-4.

"Those days" would be the year A.D. 27. What would you have seen if you were transported back in time to that era? Life in Judea, for most people, was a daily effort to make ends meet. Most of the people would have claimed to be "God's people;" after all, they had the beautiful temple, which crowned the brow of Jerusalem. They claimed a rich history and heritage, beginning with the call of Abraham and the establishment of the nation of Israel under the guidance of Moses. They displayed an impressive list of prophets in their national archives: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and other illustrious names of whom they felt justifiably proud.

And yet there was a lack of true spirituality in the hearts of most of the population. For the majority, it was "living for the present life." In addition, many were engaging in practices and patterns of life not approved by God. As happens when genuine spirituality is lost, form took the place of substance. Maintaining the traditions became the rule. By going to church, the synagogue, once a week or attending the annual festivals as they came along it was felt that you fulfilled your spiritual duty. For

many, there was no serious thirsting for godliness; no crying out for deliverance from inner sin; no authentic searching for His truth in daily life. And why should they? They were part of the "chosen;" they were "Abraham's children." Even if their hearts and lives bore little difference to the "unchosen," what did it matter? God had selected them, and that's all they needed.

Little encouragement to holy living could be found among the church hierarchy. In fact, the religious leadership provided a distinct lack of spiritual direction. Hypocrisy, materialism, pride, greed and a general lack of love characterized the ones who held the highest offices. They wanted to make sure everyone knew how holy they were by the prayer lists worn on their arms, and inscribed on small parchments encased in little boxes on their foreheads. Loud and long prayers were offered on street corners to demonstrate piety, but there was little heart-rending private prayer seeking His guidance and converting power. It was clear that most of these religious displays were done only for the purpose of impressing people, and that in their real lives the religious leaders were hardly God-like.

There was a vague notion of a coming Messiah, but when and what that was all about were quite fuzzy. Conflicting and confusing ideas were taught by competing rabbinical schools. However, most of the synagogue teachers presented a picture of prophecy that concentrated on the removal of the hated Romans from their midst. The Messiah, when He came, would oust the invaders and reestablish the nation of Israel to her former glory.

Like a lightning bolt, into the mist of this uncertainty flashed the ministry of John, announcing "the kingdom of heaven is at hand." He was called the Baptist, because he dipped converts beneath the waters of the River Jordan as a symbol of cleansing and new life. He and Jesus were cousins. I suppose it would be more accurate to call them second cousins, their mothers being cousins. John was a son of miraculous birth, his mother Elizabeth bearing him in her sunset years, after having been barren all of her life. He was filled with the Spirit from his birth, and was

commissioned to conduct a special preparatory ministry, announcing the coming of the Messiah, the fulfillment of the promise of the ages. He was to “prepare the way of the Lord.”

John wasn't your typical preacher. He didn't **look** like the priests of his day, he didn't **live** like the clergy of his day, and he certainly didn't **speak** like the ministers of his day. There was a seriousness and intensity in his manner. His chapel was the austere wilderness, among the brush and cacti. There was nothing comfortable about John. His surroundings, his camel hair coat and rough leather belt fit well with the directness and startling clarity of his discourses. It was not “business as usual” with John. He agitated his listeners into a consciousness of their need for repentance. His sermons were completely unlike the wishy-washy presentations that were the norm. His call was an appeal for change, for reformation in thought and deed. You didn't hear “smooth sayings” when you went to hear John.

And yet, strange as it might seem, people did come to hear John speak. Crowds of all classes flocked to hear the desert prophet. Perhaps it was the disarming sincerity that compelled them. Maybe it was because John himself “really believed” the message. What a difference when it's a personal testimony and not just a speech! There was an authenticity and a power in his presentations. In contrast to the rabbis, whose teachings were contradicted by their actions, John's life bore convincing evidence that this wasn't just a “job” he was performing. He wasn't just “punching a clock.” He was fulfilling a mission. He had no human employer: He had been sent by God.

People left the comfort of their homes to go to the desert to hear this strange looking preacher. They came to him even though they knew they'd be challenged by his testimony. They came even though his message cut to the heart and was disturbing and would bring about change in their lives. They wouldn't be the same when they left. Yet they came.

“Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.” Matthew 3:5, 6. John’s message was such that people were made aware of their need. Words were not minced. While hope was extended, he did not neglect the call to self-denial. His own life was a witness to the fact that he had himself answered the call to a simple and abstemious life. Razor-sharp focus was what John was about.

While many today would complain that his addresses weren’t politically correct, and might even offend people, but the truth is we need the ministry and message of John! Our world is much like theirs in so many ways. We see the same emphasis on the things of this life. We see the same materialism, greed and selfishness. We feel the same disappointment when those who should model the message in its clearest form are instead poor examples of Christianity.

Today we need to know “the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” The kingdom John pointed to was the “kingdom of grace,” the kingdom that “is within you,” as Jesus later explained. Christ’s coming to this earth was an important event in the agenda of that kingdom, since it would be by His death that grace could be given to us. Though the people who lived before this were accepted by grace, it was grace given in anticipation of His great act of redemption. But now the time had arrived, the prophetic clock had struck, when God would come to this earth and spill His blood in order to bring salvation. Through His sacrifice we can approach the “throne of grace.”

John was correct to declare emphatically “the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” because the true Messiah, the One Whose coming the world had awaited, was about to leave the wood shavings of Joseph’s carpenter shop and step forth to begin His public ministry, manifesting the grace of that kingdom through His teachings and acts.

John's message was about the "kingdom" only in a secondary sense. It was really about the King: it was about Jesus. But this King was coming in a way they weren't expecting. He was coming not to set up an *earthly* kingdom, but a *spiritual* one. His kingdom was concerned with principles of righteousness, not physical demonstration.

John pointed them to the One Who was to be the "Lamb of God." John 1:29. I wonder when John used that phrase, how many reflected on its significance. I wonder how many thought about the limitless lambs that had been sacrificed on countless altars during the previous four millennia, and thought to themselves, "So this is what all this has meant. All these animals, from the time of Adam, have been given as examples to help us learn that someday One would come Who would die for our sins; a 'Lamb **of God**'. It's not through the blood of bulls and goats that we're saved, but by a divine Redeemer. Can it really be true? Are we living in the time when God's Lamb will come forth, by Whose blood we will be saved?" How many heard that in John's sermon? I don't know how many caught that impression, but everyone could have! At Christ's dedication as an Infant, Simeon knew this!

Genuine, heartfelt religion was what John brought, through the grace bestowed upon him. People confessed their sins and repented. They washed their sins away in the Jordan, and could trace their sins flowing down to forever die in the Dead Sea. This was not fanaticism! It wasn't wild extremism! John's message was simple and to the point: are you willing to change? Are you willing to give up things in your life if they're not in harmony with God's will? Are you willing to have your "Christianity" come from the inside out, rather than just be pasted on like a label? How much we need John's message today!

His counsels were practical. "Bear fruit worthy of repentance." Repentance means to have a different way of *thinking* that translates into a different way of *living*. The word in the original means "to change your mind." We can take no credit

for repentance. We can't change on our own; the Bible tells us that it's through the "goodness of God that we're led to repentance." Romans 2:4. God can do that for us if we will let Him! He'll change the way we think!

John told them, "Let your conduct demonstrate that you've been changed on the inside." The people of that day trusted in the fact that because they could trace their lineage back to Abraham, that that guaranteed them a place in God's kingdom. "Not so!" warned John. "Study your history. Take a backward glance at the past. It was *sons of Abraham* who died in the wilderness in Moses' day because they didn't believe. It was *sons of Abraham* who were sent into captivity in Ezekiel's day because their faith was not made perfect by obedience. Don't rely on the fact that your name is written in a roll somewhere that that in itself will warrant you God's approval. God can make "children of Abraham" out of these rocks, John said, if He wants to.

"Let your religion be personal and heartfelt, not just a set of externals. Be aware that God will one day purge from His kingdom all those who feel they can trust in 'outside things' rather than have their hearts broken in humility and contrition." John would say to us today, "Don't trust in outward forms. Let God do His work in your heart." I once heard a speaker at a graduation say, "Don't let this diploma become an **intellectual death certificate**." He meant that graduation signified a beginning, not an end. And to those baptized today, I would say, "Don't let the baptismal certificate be a **spiritual death certificate**." It's the beginning, not the end, of your spiritual journey.

Follow the story as Luke gives it: "So the people asked him, saying, 'What shall we do then?' He answered and said to them, 'He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.'" Luke 3:10, 11. Genuine religion will counteract the poison of selfishness. The spirit of self gain is the spirit of Satan. When Christ comes into our life and

gives a new outlook, He opens our hearts so that we share with others the blessings He has given to us.

Christ gave up all as our Savior and Example. His own divinity He didn't think appropriate to cling to, in order to become our Sacrifice. He was willing to risk all, even the stability and future of the entire universe, in order to secure salvation, and the honor of His Father's name. Who are the ones that Christ invites into His kingdom? It's those who have had a heart of pity which led them to minister to the needs of others, and in so doing, have done it to Christ.

Today we need the message of John! How much of our thoughts and actions center on ourselves and fulfilling our wants. We need to have our hearts broken and see the needs of others. We need to see the ministry of sharing with the "least of these" as though we were sharing with Christ Himself. We need to repent of our selfish lives, and the extravagance with which we've surrounded ourselves, while others live in squalor.

"Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, 'Teacher, what shall we do?' And he said to them, 'Collect no more than what is appointed for you.'" Luke 3:12, 13. To be a tax-collector in that day was to be looked upon as one collaborating with the enemy. The Romans "farmed out," perhaps by competitive bid, the "franchise" of tax collection, and as long as the prescribed quota was met, any overage stayed in the folds of the garment of the "publican," as he was called. This created an opportunity for exacting more than was appropriate, and those who conducted their business in that way became inordinately wealthy.

Overreaching in business is as common today as it was then. Taking more than what is necessary, price gouging, perhaps because of an unfortunate circumstance that finds your client in desperate need and gives him few choices, is not in keeping with the character of God. Allow me to share a story with you I read from a magazine of long ago, the "Signs Of The Times" of

September 15, 1881. It concerns two brothers, Theodore and Jacob Schoonerhoven. Both professed religion, yet their lives were distinctly different.

Older brother Theodore was known as a sharp business dealer, and amassed a prodigious mound of wealth for his time, in excess of \$100,000. Younger brother Jacob was of tender conscience, and prayed that God would reveal to him His will. "I went into the woods and prayed for sanctification, when the Lord said: 'Jacob, dost thou love my will, my law, and my government with all thy heart?' I said, 'I do, Lord.' And the Lord said, 'Dost thou love thy neighbor as thyself?' I answered, 'I do Lord.' The Lord said, 'Very well, and now Jacob, prove thy word in thy life.'"

Jacob related that a week later he pulled down a book on military science, and aspired to martial fame. But then the Lord said, "Remember thy word, Jacob." And Jacob saw that his ambition was self. He dropped the book and never took it up again. Sometime later he coveted some colts, which he knew would someday be of great value. The owner was not aware of their future worth, and would be willing to sell them for a low price. Jacob was on his way to buy them when the Lord said, "Jacob, remember thy word." Jacob saw that he did not love his neighbor as himself.

He went on, but told the owner "Peter, keep your colts, they will make the most valuable horses among all I know." Peter responded, "I trust your word, but I must sell them or lose my house and land." Jacob said, "Keep your colts. I will lend you the money for your mortgage."

Later, a man came to Jacob to purchase some land. He was about to take the money, when the Lord said to him, "Remember thy word." Jacob said, "Mr. Broderick, I can't sell you those lots. That part of the city must fail in few years." It did fail, and Jacob turned the land into a farm.

He said, "Thus my sanctification went on. These lessons were never forgotten; self was banished from my buying and selling; the quick discernment of the value of property, and the foresight of coming changes, which the Creator had given me, I no more used for my own increase and wealth. It was evident to me that no man could gain wealth by speculation, and yet love his neighbor as himself."

One day while in prayer the Lord asked Jacob, "Are you ready to be sanctified in the loss of all?" He said, "Yes Lord. Take it all." There was a rap at the door, and when Jacob opened it his eyes rested on three fugitive slaves, a mother and two daughters. They asked, "Will you send us back?" The Lord spoke to Jacob's mind and said, "Will you obey my laws or man's laws." "Come in," said Jacob to the three, and sent them to Canada. Jacob, as a result of this, went to jail and lost all—house, land, herd and flock. When later released, he confessed he had become poor in this earth's goods, but that he had peace like a river and treasure in heaven.

"Likewise the soldiers asked him, 'saying, 'And what shall we do?' So he said to them, 'Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages.'" Luke 3:14. What an unusual spectacle to see in John's congregation the rich tax collector, the pious priest, the humble peasant, and the Roman soldier. Before his pulpit, they all stood the same: sinners in need of repentance and God's mercy. John drew no lines of distinction.

Let your mind consider the wonderful providence that would have designed the appointment of some Roman combatant, anxious for a call that would result in promotion, who instead was told he must serve in the hated wilderness of Judea, known for its hot summers and frequent uprisings. The day that assignment was disclosed would hardly have been hailed as a victory. The assignment would have been looked upon as a time to "get through" so you could "get on" with your life. And yet somehow, through the glorious leadings of our God, such appointments,

looked upon with scorn at the time, were actually part of a divine arrangement in leading men and women to salvation.

Some of these soldiers, who came to Palestine as hardened warriors, will one day rise in the resurrection, not in the armor they took to the grave, but in immortality. What a wonderful God we serve! John's counsel to them was not to abuse the powers given to them. As a representative of the Roman kingdom, taking advantage of their power would have been a temptation to many a soldier. It is interesting that John didn't require them to lay down their armor and go "awol." He invited them to be Christian soldiers.

Those today that are given power need to make sure it is used within the guidelines of Christianity. Just because you "can" doesn't necessarily mean you "should." If you have authority, exercise it as one who must give account to God. John also told them to be content with their wages. Sometimes Roman soldiers were compensated in salt, so valuable was that commodity back then. It is from that practice that our word "salary" is derived. John's advice for them was to be satisfied with their payment. How tempting it is to want more, and believe that we're paid below our level! It was when Lucifer became dissatisfied with what he had been given, and felt he deserved more, that sin was conceived. Has God taken care of you? Don't grumble for more. Remember that if you live in America, you automatically enjoy a lifestyle far above nearly all the rest of the world. Your garbage disposal eats better than half the planet. Be content and satisfied with what God has given you. Remember that "all this" will soon pass away anyway.

We need the message of John today! We need the message spoken with the same power, authority and urgency. The kingdom is at hand! For us, it's not just the kingdom of grace, but also the kingdom of glory! We can have full confidence that all things will soon be completed, and He will finish the work in righteousness. We can believe with full assurance that soon Jesus will return, not

as the Lamb, but as the King. Events just this week underscore the nearness of Jesus' coming.

What would John say to us if he were here? The very same things! Make sure your religion is from the heart, not just tacked on. Let God change your way of thinking to be like Christ's. Live in a way that demonstrates you are a follower of Jesus. Let God make you a conduit of blessing in sharing His blessings, both physical and spiritual, with others. Don't take undue advantage in business or any other relationship. And John would most certainly tell us, "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!"