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1

Fulfillment

MATTHEW 1

Who is Jesus

and why did

He come?

1 Fulfillment

MATTHEW 1



DISCOVER

God's "To Do list" and how it was done.



LEARN

why Christ cannot be ranked alongside Moses or Mohammed.



WORSHIP

as you see how Jesus answers the questions raised by the Old Testament.

HOW do you organize your day? Do you work to a tight schedule, or do you just take things as they come? At the start of most days, I write a “To Do list.” It gives direction and helps with setting priorities. Not that everything on my To Do list gets done! The reality is that a fair amount gets rolled onto the next day. What’s really discouraging is when the list is longer at the end of the day than it was at the beginning.

Some things on the To Do list are pretty simple: Make a call, write a letter, or follow through on a decision. Other things are more extensive: Write an essay or prepare a presentation. When the list is complete, it’s time to stop planning and start working.

The real joy of a To Do list comes later in the day, when you draw a heavy line through each item and mark it “Done.” There’s nothing quite like the satisfaction of knowing that everything you planned to do is complete.

GOD’S “TO DO LIST”

In volumes 1 and 2 of *Unlocking the Bible Story*, we discovered God’s amazing promises. God told the prophets what He would do. You can think of the prophets as announcing God’s “To Do list.”

Of course, God’s To Do list does not arise from obligations that are laid on Him. Nobody can tell God what to do. God’s To Do list arises from commitments that He has made freely and voluntarily. God has promised to do certain things, and

because God is always faithful to His word, these things must be done. By the end of the Old Testament story, it's quite a list.

The New Testament opens by reminding us of the people to whom God made His greatest promises. Matthew arranged the genealogy of Jesus in three groups of fourteen generations, beginning with Abraham, David, and the exile, respectively. In this way, he focused readers on three points during the Old Testament genealogy where God's greatest promises were made. Matthew wanted us to know that the coming of Jesus was the fulfillment of all that God had promised to do.

A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham. (MATTHEW 1:1)

Jesus is introduced as “the son of Abraham.” Two thousand years before Jesus was born, God promised that His blessing would flow through Abraham to every nation. “I will bless you . . . and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:2–3).

Abraham wondered how this could be since he had no children. But God stepped in and caused Abraham and Sarah to have a child in their old age. The birth of Isaac was a miracle, but God's blessing did not come to the world through him. So the promise to Abraham remained on God's To Do list.

Jesus is also introduced as “the son of David.” God had spoken to David about a descendant who would build a house for God's name. God promised to establish that Son's throne and kingdom forever. Then God added, “I will be his father, and he will be my son” (2 Samuel 7:13–14).

David's son Solomon built a magnificent temple for the glory of God. But Solomon did not fulfill God's promise. His temple was eventually destroyed, and his kingdom certainly did not last forever. So this whole business of building a permanent house and establishing a throne was added to God's To Do list.

Matthew's third focal point in the genealogy is the Exile.

There were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ. (v. 17)

Some of God's greatest promises in the Old Testament are associated with the Exile. When His people faced their darkest hour, God promised that He would make a new covenant and give His people a new heart (see Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel

36). He promised to create a community of people who would live according to His Law, not out of obligation but because of an inner desire. These promises were made about six hundred years before the time of Jesus, and during those centuries they remained on God's To Do list.

Despite all that God had done for His people through the Old Testament story, God's greatest promises were still unfulfilled. God's blessing was still to come to the nations, the kingdom that would never end was still to be established, and the hearts of the people were still to be renewed. By the end of the Old Testament story, there was a long list of things to be done.

GETTING GOD'S TO DO LIST DONE

Matthew then tells us how the birth of Jesus Christ came about (in verses 18 and following). Mary was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Joseph did not know what to make of this until one night God spoke to him through a dream. He saw an angel, who told him not to be afraid. He was to call Mary's child Jesus because this child would "save his people from their sins" (v. 21). Then Matthew tells us,

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet. (v. 22, EMPHASIS ADDED)

In other words, when Jesus Christ came into the world, the things God had said He would do were done.

As you read through the Gospels, you find the same point repeated again and again. We are told about how Joseph took Mary and the child to Egypt when Herod was searching for the child with the intent of destroying Him. Matthew explains that this "fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son'" (Matthew 2:15). It was as if the event had been on God's To Do list, and now it was done.

Then the young family moved to a town called Nazareth. Matthew explains that this "fulfilled what was said through the prophets: 'He will be called a Nazarene'" (v. 23). Done!

At the beginning of His ministry, Jesus moved from Nazareth to Capernaum, which is in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali. Matthew reminds us that this was "to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah" (Matthew 4:14). Done!

"This happened that the Scripture might be fulfilled."



Luke tells us about the first public event in the ministry of Jesus. He came into the synagogue and read from the prophet Isaiah. “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Then Jesus rolled up the scroll, returned it to the attendant, and took His seat. Everyone in the synagogue stared intently; then Jesus announced, “Today this scripture is *fulfilled* in your hearing” (Luke 4:18–19, 21, emphasis added).

“What God has promised is now being done—by Me!” He had declared. No wonder the people were astonished at His teaching!

The theme of God’s promises being fulfilled runs throughout the Gospels. The detail is staggering. Even the enemies of Jesus, who had every interest in showing that He did not fulfill the prophecies of the Old Testament, found themselves playing their part in demonstrating that He did!

When Judas betrayed Jesus, the chief priests gave him thirty pieces of silver, which he used to buy a field. Matthew reminds us that this fulfilled what God had spoken by Jeremiah the prophet (Matthew 27:9).

When Jesus was on the cross, the soldiers took His clothes and divided them between them. But Christ had a seamless robe, and they decided to draw lots and give it to the winner. John wrote that “this happened that the scripture might be fulfilled which said, ‘They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing’” (John 19:24).

Later, the soldiers came to break the legs of the three who were being crucified. They did this to hasten the process. They broke the legs of the two thieves who were crucified with Jesus, but when they came to Jesus, they found that He was already dead. So they did not break His legs but instead thrust a spear into His side. Again, John noted that, “These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: ‘Not one of his bones will be broken,’ and, as another scripture says, ‘They will look on the one they have pierced’” (19:36–37).

THE PORTRAIT ON A DIFFERENT WALL

This theme of fulfillment is important for those who question whether Jesus really is the Savior God had promised from the beginning of time. Jesus Himself was in no doubt about it. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17).

If you want to know who Jesus is, you need to understand that He is altogether different from the Old Testament prophets, or indeed from any other religious leader who has ever lived.

A friend of mine recently attended a seminar on religious education in which he was told that Judaism stops with Moses, Christianity stops with Jesus, and Islam stops with Mohammed. The assumption was that Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed could be compared, as if their portraits belonged together on the same wall.

Many people see Jesus as another great figure in the line of religious history. They see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Jesus, Paul, and others continuing into contemporary times as belonging to a “class” of great religious teachers. As people view this “gallery,” they draw different personal conclusions about who is the greatest.

But Jesus cannot be placed alongside the prophets, or alongside any other religious teacher. The prophets announced God’s promises. Every time they spoke, God’s To Do list became longer! If Jesus were another prophet, He would be limited to announcing more things that God would one day do. His coming would contribute nothing to getting them done.

Of course, there have always been people who thought of Jesus as one of the prophets (see Matthew 16:14), but Jesus made it clear that we must not understand Him in this way. “I have come to fulfill the prophets,” He said. Jesus did not come to make God’s To Do list longer. He came so that God’s To Do list would be done!

God . . . has
fulfilled His
promises through
Jesus Christ.



Opponents of Christianity like to suggest that it is a new religion invented by a man called Jesus who lived a mere two thousand years ago. But the Bible story goes back to the beginning of time. It tells us what God has said He would do, and it tells us that He has fulfilled His promises through Jesus Christ.

This is the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. The prophets announced God’s promises of blessing for all nations, a kingdom that will never end, and a new heart for God’s people, but only Jesus Christ was able to fulfill them. His portrait belongs alone on a different wall.

GETTING OUR TO DO LIST DONE

Once we understand the uniqueness of Jesus, we will be able to grasp what He has done more clearly. When Jesus announced what would be accomplished through His ministry, He made it clear that He came to fulfill not only the Prophets but also the Law.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”

(MATTHEW 5:17–18)

If the prophets represent God’s To Do list, then the Law—all the commands given to Moses, including the Ten Commandments—represents our To Do list. In the Law, God tells us what He requires us to do. Jesus makes it clear that He did not come to abolish the Law. The Law of God will stand until heaven and earth disappear, and that hasn’t happened yet!

So it would be a grave mistake to think that God was concerned about the Law and righteousness in the Old Testament, but that somehow He changed His focus and switched to grace and forgiveness in the New Testament. The whole Bible is one story. God has always been gracious and forgiving, and His Law stands forever.

The Law of God is still our To Do list. But Jesus says that He has come to “fulfill the Law.” In other words, He came to move the Law from the To Do list to the Done list. He does this in three ways: in His life, by His death, and through His people.

BRINGING THE LAW TO LIFE

The Law is not an arbitrary set of moral rules but a written description of God’s character and glory. As we saw in volume 1 of *Unlocking the Bible Story*, the reason we should not lie is that God is truth. The reason we should not commit adultery is that God is faithful. The reason we should not murder is that life is the gift of God.

The Law tells us what God is like and describes His calling for our lives. Jesus came to live the life that God has put on your To Do list. He lifted the words of God’s Law off the page and expressed them fully in His perfect life. That is why Jesus could say, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being,” the Scripture says. This is why Paul wrote that we see “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (Hebrews 1:3; 2 Corinthians 4:6).

In the Law, God told us how we are to live in this world. He said, in essence, “This is your To Do list.” Consider the long list of names at the beginning of Matthew’s gospel. Not one of them fulfilled the Law of God. But when Jesus came, it was done.

PAYING OFF SOME OLD DEBTS

The Law does more than tell us the kind of life God requires. It also announces the consequences of sin. This is why the Bible talks about the curse of the Law. The soul that sins will die.

Throughout the Old Testament story, God repeatedly postponed this condemnation. When Adam disobeyed in the garden, God was gracious to him, and although he was excluded from Paradise, his life continued. Abraham told lies about his wife, but he remained a friend of God. David committed adultery, and yet he remained on Israel's throne. Isaiah confessed to being a man of unclean lips, but he was still used as a prophet. None of them came under the condemnation of God announced in the Law.

Why? The reason cannot be that their sin didn't matter, because the whole point of the Law is that it does. "The soul who sins will die" (Ezekiel 18:4 NASB). And Christ says that God's Law will stand even when heaven and earth pass away (Matthew 24:35).

The answer is that throughout the Old Testament God held back the condemnation of the Law. He put off the Day of Judgment. He didn't cancel it, but He did postpone it. God said, in effect, "We will deal with that later." He put the whole matter of dealing with the consequences of human sin on His To Do list.

The windows in our shopping malls are regularly filled with advertisements enticing us to buy. Often you will see a poster saying, "Nothing to pay until January of next year." It sounds wonderful—Why, it's virtually free!—and it is, until the letter arrives in January of next year announcing that the time for payment has come. The payment was not canceled; it was only postponed. At some point the bill has to be paid.

Throughout the Old Testament, the sacrifices reminded God's people that there would come a time when something had to be done. But the consequences of sin remained like an accumulating debt that one day would have to be paid.

Then Jesus came. "I have come to fulfill the Law," He said. That meant not only that He would fulfill everything the Law required in His life, but also that He would bear the condemnation of the Law in His death.

This is why He had to go to the cross. God's time for dealing with the consequences of sin had come. On the cross, Jesus bore the consequences of human sin in His own body (see 1 Peter 2:24).

All that
remained "to do"
... has been
accomplished
fully ... by
Jesus Christ.



The judgment and condemnation described in God's Law were poured out on Him, and when He had absorbed it fully, He cried out in a loud voice, "It is finished!" At that moment, dealing with sin was struck off God's To Do list because, for all His people, it was done.

Done!

This is why we do not offer sacrifices. The communion service is not a new sacrifice, as if our sin still needed to be dealt with, but a reminder that through the death of Jesus, it is done. This is why we do not need a temple but have direct access to God by the Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ. It's done!

All that remained "to do" throughout the entire period of the Old Testament has been accomplished fully and finally by Jesus Christ. In the words of Jonathan Edwards:

Though millions of sacrifices had been offered, yet nothing was done to purchase redemption before Christ's incarnation. . . . But as soon as Christ was incarnate, the purchase began. And the whole time of Christ's humiliation, till the morning that he rose from the dead, was taken up in this purchase. Then the purchase was entirely and completely finished. As nothing was done before Christ's incarnation, so nothing was done after his resurrection to purchase redemption for men. Nor will there ever be any thing more done to all eternity.¹

A NEW DESIRE AND A NEW DIRECTION

As we follow the Bible story, we will discover still another way in which Jesus fulfills the Law. The apostle Paul wrote:

What the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit. (ROMANS 8:3-4)

Jesus came to bring you into a new life in which you will begin to fulfill the Law of God. He died to bring you out of condemnation, and He lives to lead you into a righteous life.

Over the years, I have noticed a pattern in the things that get pushed to the bottom of my To Do lists. They are the things I don't like and the things I feel I

can't do. That is exactly our problem when it comes to the Law of God. By nature, we don't like it, and we can't do it, so our first instinct is to leave it on the list of good intentions for another day.

Jesus came to save us from that. He came to make you the person God always intended you to be. He will do that by giving you a hunger and thirst for righteousness and with that new desire, the power of the Holy Spirit so that your life may move in the direction of the Law of God.

When I was fourteen, our family went for a vacation in the town of Torquay in England. The accommodation was poor, the beaches were crowded, and it was one of those vacations that just didn't work out well. I remember traveling home in the backseat of the car. None of us was happy, and at one point I remember saying a very foolish thing. "Dad," I said, "I don't ever want to go to that town again."

My mother pointed out that this was the sort of thing that one might regret saying. She was right. Six years later, I met a girl from that town. I fell in love with her and married her. At the age of twenty, I said to my mother, "I want to go to Torquay." I've enjoyed going there ever since!

When God's Spirit begins to work in your life, you will have a new hunger and a thirst for righteousness. You will begin to own the Law of God as your To Do list. You may be a long way from doing it fully, but you will discover a new desire to grow in it. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matthew 5:6). They have come to want what God wants for them, and their desire will be satisfied.

Jesus died to save us from the condemnation of the Law. He lives to lead us into new lives in which we fulfill the Law by the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ accepts us as we are, but He never leaves us as we are. It is the purpose of God to make us righteous so that we will reflect His glory in a life that fulfills the Law of God.

If you roll the story of the Bible forward to the end, you learn that on the last day Christ will stand before the Father and say, "Here am I, and the children God has given me" (Hebrews 2:13). We shall not only see Christ, but we will be like Him. The day is coming when God will take you off His To Do list. He will look at you and He will say, "Done!"

UNLOCKED

Jesus cannot be compared to the Old Testament prophets or the prophets of any other religion. The prophets announced what God required and what God would do. Jesus came to fulfill what God requires, and to accomplish what God said He would do. He fulfills both the Law and the Prophets by delivering what God promised through them. All that God had placed on His “To Do list” is done through Jesus Christ.

Christ fulfills the Law in three ways: (1) by living a life that perfectly reflected everything that God requires of us in His Law; (2) by absorbing the condemnation of the Law for our sin through His death on the cross; and (3) by making it possible for us to live a new life in line with the Law of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. He came to demonstrate the Law to us. He died to fulfill the Law for us, and He lives to fulfill the Law in us.

PAUSE FOR PRAYER

Almighty Father,

Thank You for every one of Your promises, and for the knowledge that every one of them will be fulfilled. Thank You for sending Jesus Christ so that in Him everything You promised would be done.

Thank You for the life of Jesus in which all that You are is perfectly expressed. Thank You for the death of Jesus, in which the condemnation of my sin is fully absorbed.

Help me by the power of Your Spirit to grow in the new life that is Your purpose for me. Strengthen my desire to live according to Your Law, and for Your glory, as I look forward to the day when Your work in me will be done, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Note

1. Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, vol. 1 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 1974), 572.



2

Repentance

MATTHEW 3

*What does it
mean to repent?*

2 Repentance

MATTHEW 3



DISCOVER

the secret of real and lasting change.



LEARN

why repentance continues throughout the Christian life.



WORSHIP

because Jesus has opened the kingdom of heaven.

ON March 16, 1978, a supertanker called the *Amoco Cadiz* ran aground off the coast of Brittany, France, and lost its entire load of nearly a quarter of a million tons of crude oil into the Atlantic Ocean. Oil was swept onto more than 130 beaches, and some of them were covered with oil up to a foot deep.

The damage was incredible. Over 30,000 seabirds died; 230,000 tons of crabs, lobsters, and other fish perished. That, plus the destruction of rich oyster and seaweed beds, devastated the fishing economies of the local communities.¹

When a disaster like this happens, there are multiple problems. In the months that followed, there were legal proceedings. There was a price to pay; in this case, a judge in Chicago awarded damages of \$85.2 million to the affected French towns. But there was also a problem of pollution on the beaches. A clean-up operation had to be mounted to restore what had been so dreadfully damaged.

The story of the *Amoco Cadiz* can help us to understand the multiple effects of the great disaster of sin and the different dimensions of God's clean-up operation that the Bible calls salvation. Most Christians understand that there is a penalty to pay for sin, and that Jesus paid this for us in His death on the cross. But salvation also involves a clean-up operation to deal with the damage caused by sin in our lives.

Think about the beauty of a line of sandy beaches. Think about crystal clear water supporting the life of fish, plants, and birds. Now picture crude oil pouring from a stricken vessel. That's what sin does. It pollutes and destroys.

When Christ came to save us, He had to pay the penalty for our sins by His death on the cross. But that is not enough—He must also deal with the effects of sin within us. Salvation involves restoring the beauty that has been devastated by sin.

This is where we ended the first chapter. Jesus came to demonstrate the Law to us and to bear the condemnation of the Law for us. But there is a third dimension that is often forgotten: He came so that the Law should be fulfilled in us, and if God's Law is going to be fulfilled in our lives, it's going to mean change. Big change!

TIME FOR A CHANGE

When the angel announced the birth of Jesus, he did not say, "You shall call his name Jesus, because he will *forgive* his people for their sins." He said, "You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will *save* his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21, emphasis added).

To "save" people from their sins means to bring them out of their sins. It means delivering them from every dimension of this disaster. If Christ delivered us from the condemnation of sin without delivering us from its power in our lives, it would be like paying the fine for the *Amoco Cadiz* but doing nothing to clean up the beaches. That would be ridiculous. Anyone who thinks that salvation is forgiveness without change is completely mistaken. Salvation is much more than forgiveness and a free ticket to heaven. Christ came to make you the person God wants you to be.

One of the greatest errors among Christian people has been to divide the Bible as if we had one book in which God's interest was in issuing commandments and calling people to a holy life, and another alternative book in which God's interest was in issuing free tickets to heaven.

That would be a complete misunderstanding of the Bible. It has always been God's purpose to deliver His people from sin *and* lead us into a holy life. The whole Bible is one story. God's grace is written all over the Old Testament, and His call to a holy life is written all over the New. That call was central to the message of John the Baptist and Jesus.

ECCENTRIC PREACHER DRAWS A CROWD

By any standards John the Baptist must have been an eccentric kind of a preacher. His personal style was rather strange. "John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey" (Matthew 3:4).

His choice of avenue was also rather strange. We find him preaching in the desert. I guess that would solve some parking problems on Sunday mornings, but you wouldn't expect to find much of a congregation in such a desolate place!

The remarkable thing is that people came out to hear him. "People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan" (3:5).

Clearly some kind of spiritual awakening happened during John's ministry, and people were willing to travel to be part of it. They were tired of the placid words they heard from other preachers of the day. They were hungry for truth, and they knew that when they heard John speak, they were hearing the Word of God.

Jesus said that people went into the desert to hear John because he was a prophet (see Matthew 11:7–9). There was a certain courage and integrity in John the Baptist that was powerfully attractive. He was absolutely fearless. He gave the same message to the king as he did to the people in the desert. John told Herod that he had to repent. Herod didn't like the message, and he ordered John imprisoned and later had him beheaded. Jesus commended John as the greatest of the prophets.

John's message was very simple: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (3:2). What God has promised since the beginning of time is about to happen. "So you need to change!" John was saying.

When Jesus began to preach, His message was exactly the same, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 4:17). Peter preached the same message on the Day of Pentecost, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). The apostle Paul also proclaimed the same truth. "I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus" (Acts 20:21).

Repentance is fundamental to the gospel. It is the first thing that Jesus Christ says, and if we do not understand this, we will not be able to enter into anything else.

AN OPEN DOOR OF OPPORTUNITY

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." (MATTHEW 3:2)

The message of John and Jesus gives us the most marvelous motivation for repentance. Throughout human history, heaven had been closed to men and women. The cherubim and the flaming sword barred the way into the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve had known the blessing and presence of God.

Access to heaven had been cut off for Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, and the prophets. God was gracious to them and made great promises to them, but when they died, they joined a long line of people waiting for God's promise to be fulfilled.

Now, at last, God was about to open up access to heaven through the coming of Jesus Christ. In effect, John was saying, "The promise men have longed for throughout history is about to be fulfilled. This is a moment of golden opportunity, and if you want to grasp it, you are going to have to change. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

LIVING IN A NEW KINGDOM

Notice that John described heaven as a kingdom. A kingdom is a place under the rule of a king. If you want to be in the kingdom of heaven, you have to submit yourself to the rule of the King of heaven.

For thirty-eight years of my life, I was not subject to the laws of the United States of America, for the simple reason that I was living in Great Britain. I was outside the laws of America and I was outside its blessings.

Then, in 1996, I was invited to come to the United States and serve as senior pastor of the Arlington Heights Evangelical Free Church in Illinois. When I came, I was immediately released from an old set of laws I used to be subject to in Great Britain, and I became subject to a whole new set of laws in America.

I have to admit that some of the new laws are difficult for me, like driving at incredibly low speeds on open roads. But I have found from experience that if I am stopped by a police officer, it simply will not do for me to say I am operating under the laws of Her Majesty, the queen! The officer would properly point out that if I want to operate by another set of laws, I had better go back to the place where those laws hold sway.

Many Christians are confused at this point. They have the idea that as long as they believe certain things about Jesus Christ, all is well. That is exactly the error that James addressed when he pointed out that "even the demons believe" in God, and they tremble when they think about Him (James 2:19)!

The blessings of the kingdom of heaven are available to all who will receive them. The borders of heaven have been thrown open. Immigration to this kingdom is open to all who will come from north, south, east, or west. But if you would come to the kingdom where Christ reigns, you must place yourself under His authority, and John was saying, "That means you will have to change. Repent, for the

kingdom of heaven is near. You cannot have the benefits of the kingdom if you will not bow to the King.”

A CHANGE OF DIRECTION

The word *repent* means “change.” Repentance is a change of mind that results in a change of behavior.

Jesus illustrated the meaning of repentance through a story He told about a man who had two sons (see Matthew 21:28–32). The father told the first to go and work in the field. The son refused, but later he changed his mind and went. The father also told the second son to go and work in the field. He agreed to go, but then he changed his mind and stayed at home. Both of them repented; they changed their minds and their behavior (though only the first changed for the good).

Jesus explained that this was what was happening when John the Baptist preached. People who had resisted God’s commandments changed their minds and did what they had previously refused to do. There was a fundamental change in their response to the commandments of God.

THE POWER OF CONFESSION

It is important to notice that this change did not remain a private matter in the mind of the individual. “Confessing their sins, they were baptized by [John] in the Jordan River” (Matthew 3:6).

This does not mean that the people confessed all of their sins publicly. That would clearly be inappropriate. A good rule is that confession should normally be at the level of the people who are affected by an offense. If I have sinned in my thoughts, I should confess to God alone. If I have sinned in words or actions against one person, I should also confess to him. If my actions have affected many people, then many need to know about my repentance.

These people were moving out of denial, which in some cases had been going on for many years. John’s ministry brought them to the place where they were ready to say, “I am a person who needs to be forgiven,” and that’s where change begins.

Matthew tells us that the Pharisees and Sadducees came to look at what was happening in this spiritual revival, but they did not feel the need to be forgiven or to be baptized. They never discovered repentance, and they went home unchanged.

This must have caused great sadness for John. He warned them about their smugness and complacency. “Do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have

Abraham as our father” (v. 9). Relying on your heritage while you refuse to repent is a sure formula for spiritual disaster.

It worries me when people speak about how they have tried to live a good life. Not that I don’t think it’s true; I am sure it is. It worries me because words like these often come from a mind that has never seen the need for Jesus Christ.

Repentance begins when we get out of the denial that causes us to think of ourselves as fundamentally “OK” and come to the place of saying, “I am a person who needs to be forgiven. I am therefore a person who needs Jesus Christ, and the forgiveness that flows from His cross.” It’s strange that many people who have been in church for years find that the hardest thing to say.

HERE’S WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW

Repentance goes beyond our thoughts and beyond our words to a change in our behavior. John was clear about this:

“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” (v. 8)

Fruit is visible, and repentance will show up in a visible change in what you do. Luke gives us some additional information about the response to John’s preaching. As the crowd listened to his message, they were clearly moved by what they heard and wanted to know what they should do (Luke 3:10).

They probably thought that he would tell them some things they could change when they got home. But John stunned them with a call to immediate action. The crowd was in the desert. Some of them would be cold and some would be hungry, so John called on the others to share their clothing and food (v. 11). In effect, he said, “Here’s what you can do. Some of you over here have two coats. Find someone without a coat and give him one of yours. Others have a large picnic hamper. Find someone who has no food and share your meal with him or her.”

This was on-the-spot teaching and discipleship. The whole thing was so alive, so dynamic. Repentance is not an intention to lead a new life in the future; it begins now, as you step out in obedience to God in your immediate situation.

Repentance is also specific. Tax collectors asked John what they should do, and John told them, “Don’t collect any more than you are required to.” Soldiers asked him what they should do, and he told them, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay” (vv. 12–14).

The application to specific cases was different, but the principle was the same: Do what you have to do to bring your life into line with the commandments of God. That's repentance. It comes from a change of mind about your response to God, and it works through different patterns of behavior.

DON'T EVER STOP CHANGING

Repentance should never be limited to a onetime event. Many Christians see repentance as an initial act, which is completed at the beginning of the Christian life, a kind of gateway that we pass through and then leave behind. God's call to repent is immediate and specific; but it is also continuing.

Many Christians know that Martin Luther nailed ninety-five theses to the door of the cathedral at Wittenberg, Germany, but not so many know what those theses said. The first of the Ninety-five Theses made that simple point. When Jesus Christ said that we should repent, He called us to an entire lifetime of repentance.

Theologian and Bible expositor James Packer helps us to understand this when he writes, "Repentance means turning from as much as you know of your sin to give as much as you know of yourself to as much as you know of your God. . . . As our knowledge grows at these three points so our practice of repentance has to be enlarged." Grow in the Christian life, and you will see things in yourself that you never saw before. God is gracious and He will show us our sins slowly. If He showed them all at once, we would be devastated.

The Christian life is a journey of discovery. As we come to know more about God, we will discover more about ourselves, and our repentance will become deeper, touching areas that were hidden from us before.

THE MINISTRY OF MATCHMAKING

John's message led people to the point where they saw the need for change and had a desire for it. But he could not give them the power they needed to follow through. When John was faced with an audience of people who knew that they needed to change, he told them that they should go to Christ.

"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry." (v. 11)

John was a great leader because he knew the limitations of his own ministry. "I can baptize you with water. I can help you express your desire to live a new and

different life,” he was saying. “I can counsel you, I can encourage you, but I cannot give you the power to change. What I can tell you is that someone is coming after me, and He will give you that power.”

When Jesus began to preach, John identified Him as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). And of course, when he did that, those who had been following John left him and became followers of Jesus, which is exactly what he wanted them to do. So this great preacher ended up with no personal following, but his ministry was the means of many coming to Christ. John did what God had called him to do, and then he cleared the stage. He did not draw people to himself; he told them to go to Jesus.

My wife, Karen, and I have friends in England who have been happily married for twenty years and have three delightful children. They represent our one successful attempt at matchmaking. I was speaking at a youth leader’s conference, and we persuaded the two of them to join us for the weekend.

She had an eye on him but he, lacking confidence, found that hard to believe. So we seized this ministry opportunity. She was saying to Karen, “I really like him, but I don’t think he is interested.” He said to me, “I really like her, but I don’t think I have a chance.”

“Ask her for a date,” I said confidently. “Tell her what you feel. I can tell you on good authority that if you do, you will get a good response.”

Finally it happened. I have no idea what he said to her, but it obviously met with an enthusiastic response. Frankly the precise words he used didn’t actually matter all that much. The important thing was that he made it clear he wanted her in his life, and that was exactly what she felt about him.

I can tell you . . . After that, we faded from the picture. That’s the ministry of John the Baptist. He knew that the only way to a new life was to go personally and directly to Christ and ask Him for it.

Christ will

welcome you.

I’ve spoken to people who are rather like my friend when it comes to approaching Christ. They say that they wouldn’t know what to say in a prayer.

The precise words that you use are not important. There is no formula. Tell Him you are a sinner. Tell Him what your sins are. Tell Him you need to be forgiven. Tell Him that you need His power if you are to change. Pursue Him as you would pursue a lover.

I can tell you on good authority that Christ will welcome you. He promised, “Whoever comes to me I will never drive away” (John 6:37; see also Matthew 11:28). He also said, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7). God will meet with you.

Talking to a pastor, counselor, or Christian friend can be helpful, but it can never be a substitute. They may encourage you, they may answer your questions, they may even tell you what will happen if you go to Christ, but at the end of the day you have to make that move, and nobody else can do it for you.

DRENCHED IN THE LIFE OF GOD

John the Baptist told the people what would happen if they came to Christ.

“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (v. 11)

The word *baptize* means to dip, plunge, or immerse. The Holy Spirit is, of course, the Spirit of God, so when John said, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit,” he was saying that Jesus will drench you in the life of God.

This baptism
[is] like fire. . . .
It purifies and
it destroys.



If you go to Christ, there will be a divine invasion of your life. The Holy Spirit of God will take up residence in you. He will be poured out in you. Like water saturating, there is no place that He will not go.

John also described this baptism as being like fire. Fire does two things. It purifies and it destroys. Our God is a consuming fire, and when Jesus pours out the Spirit, the rubbish in our lives gets burned up.

Try to picture John and Jesus standing some distance apart with their followers around them. John baptizes with water. Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit. John is able to help people express their desire for a new life. Jesus gives them the power to live a new life. John cannot give the Spirit. Jesus can.

Now read the following testimony. It’s the sort of thing one hears in church quite often. Read carefully, and ask yourself whether there is anything in what this person says to indicate that he or she has received what Christ offers:

“I was brought up in a Christian family and attended church since I was very young. When I was about sixteen years old, some of my friends were going to a Christian camp and I decided to go along and see what was happening.

“As I listened to the speaker—he was great—I began to realize that there was a lot wrong with my life. I really wanted to change, so I prayed a prayer of commitment to God. Since then things have been different. It hasn’t always been easy, but today I am being baptized to show that I want to live a life that is pleasing to God and then to be with Him in heaven.”

There is nothing distinctively Christian about that testimony. This person has said nothing about Christ and nothing about the Holy Spirit.

This person is in exactly the same position as those who gathered around John.

“Brought up in a Christian family” (religious background).

“Went to camp and heard a great speaker” (sounds rather like hearing John in the desert).

“Began to realize there was a lot wrong with my life and wanted to change” (just like John’s audience).

“Today I’m being baptized to show that I want to live a life that is pleasing to God.” (That’s what the people who were baptized by John would have said.)

This person is standing with John. He or she hasn’t experienced anything more than John has to offer. He is confessing that he needs to change and wants to change, but nothing more.

There are many people like this in churches today. They have a religious background and have made some kind of commitment, but they have never sensed their great need of Christ and never come to Him. As a result, they have never experienced the life of God invading their soul. They think they have what the Bible offers, but they have missed its heart. They are living in the world of the Old Testament, and Jesus came to deliver us from that. John would say to them, “Go to Christ, and He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

UNLOCKED

Repentance is a change of mind that results in a change of behavior. It is motivated by the fact that God has opened up the borders of heaven and extended an open invitation to all who would like to live under His blessing and rule. Heaven is a kingdom, so entering it means becoming subject to the laws of the King.

God's Spirit is able to break the power of sin in our lives and lead us in a new direction that is pleasing to God. God gives us His Spirit when we come to Jesus Christ in repentance and faith.

PAUSE FOR PRAYER

Gracious Father,

My great desire is to live under Your authority as a citizen of Your kingdom.

Help me by the power of Your Spirit to grow in that new life. Show me hidden sins that I had not seen before. Deliver me from the blindness that keeps me from seeing the truth about myself. Show me more of Your glory so that I may worship You more fully, through Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.

Notes

1. "Historic Environmental Events: *Amoco Cadiz* Oil Spill Disaster," on the Internet at www.lexisnexis.com/academic/3cis/cist/eanet/history.htm. Accessed on 10 May 2002.
2. J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1984), 104.