

Well, it's Christmas Eve, the day **before** we celebrate the birth of Jesus. But it's also a Sunday, the day that every week, we assemble together to celebrate the **resurrection** of our Lord....

I do find it interesting, the way secular society celebrates "Christmas", more than it celebrates "Easter". And maybe it's our secular society being honest with itself, that it now wants to call it the "holiday season" (because that's what they're celebrating – a holiday) rather than the "Christmas season". And they say "Happy Holiday", rather than "Happy/merry/blessed Christmas"

And I think I might've mentioned this last year, "I actually don't have a problem with them using the word "holiday", because "holiday" means "holy day". And every time a person says "Happy holiday", it is (in fact) proclaiming (without them knowing it), that Christmas, is a holy day, because we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ....

But things are very different for Disciples of Jesus, hey – we don't have to be tricked into proclaiming it's a holy day... Christmas truly is a **holy** day for us.

As we celebrate the birth of our Saviour, it is a Happy/holy/blessed Christ-mass. BTW some of us might be allergic to the word "mass" because that's what the Roman Catholics call "church". But the word "mass" simply means "gathering/assembly", which is entirely consistent with the original Greek word for Church "ecclesia" (church; gathering;

assembly; mass),,,, all synonyms for the “the gathering of the Disciples of Jesus Christ, together in worship”.

And I find it bazaar, that tomorrow (Christmas morning), most churches I know, won't be massing/assembling/gathering, and are having more of a “holiday” than a “Christ-mas”. I just find that a bit sad...

But today, we gather together in worship on Sunday, to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord.

Now, when it comes to Christmas, things **are** very different for Christians... And we're going to highlight that today, because the Bible reading for today, underlines the purpose of Jesus' coming...

So, on this Christmas eve, we've read about a baby (whom God sent), and was filled with the Holy Spirit, before Jesus was born.... We know him as “John the Baptist”.

Now, I looked up what the name “John” means. It must be very important, because the reading today, makes a big deal, that this little baby, had to be named “John”...

BTW, what does John the Baptist; Winnie the Pooh; and Jack the Ripper all have in common???? (Middle name).

Anyway, the angel Gabriel, told Zechariah, that he was to name his son, “John”. But then, when this miracle baby was

born, when he was 8 days old, he fronts up for his circumcision ceremony, and the officials were about to name him Zechariah Jnr, and his mum says **"No; he shall be called John."**

And they argued with her... (who does that?) "There's no John in your family heritage – you can't call him that..." and so Zechariah wrote it down, **"His name is John."** And they were perplexed that he would call him "John", But at that point – at the naming of the child, immediately Zechariah (who had been struck dumb), was able to talk again, and he praised God...

It makes a big deal, that this child was named "John". What does it mean? The name "John" (in Hebrew, is *Yowchanan*) which means "YHWH has been gracious".

And the name of John the Baptist "YHWH has been gracious", it isn't merely a recognition of the grace of God in providing this childless couple with a long-awaited child – it is what the message of John the Baptist is about. "YHWH has been gracious"

There was going to be something very important about this baby. The Angel said **he will be great before the Lord.** And he wasn't to drink any alcohol – it was like there was to be a special holiness – a special consecration, which is above the call of an ordinary person. **And he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.**

Now, we need to remember: this is before Whitsunday/Pentecost (when God sent his Holy Spirit upon the church). This is in the period where the Holy Spirit would only be given to particular people, for a particular purpose, at a particular time. And in the Old Testament Scriptures, when the Holy Spirit would come upon someone, it was usually to empower them for a prophetic role, and that's what it was in John.

Even when baby John was in his mum's uterus, he recognised Jesus in the uterus of Mary. And the baby leaped in her womb.

So, John, right from before he was born, was filled with the Holy Spirit, to be a prophet of God. And the angel told Zechariah **more** than that – he told him about what **type** of prophet he was going to be. He would go before God, operating in the spirit and power of Elijah.

What does that mean???

Well, Elijah: often his word, was from the top down. And he spoke to kings, and he told them to repent... and they hated him, and Elijah feared for his life because of it...

And we see this reflected in the life of John the Baptist. John the Baptist stood his ground against King Herod who was shackled up with his sister-in-law... And he told him, that's immoral – you cannot do this before God... And so King Herod had him thrown into the dungeon, and eventually, at the whim of his adulterous partner and her little girl, he had John executed and his head presented on a platter....

And so, yeah, in that way, John definitely did take after Elijah – calling kings to repentance and suffering because those in power hated him... He was also like Elijah, in that it seemed the whole nation had turned against God, but some repented – it was like there was a remnant who would be saved...

But the most significant aspect of the message that John would go before God in the spirit and power of Elijah, : is that **this** phrase, points us to the Old Testament Scriptures, and the very last of the prophets **in** the Old Testament...

The prophet Malachi (only 4 chapters), and the final 3 verses of the Old Testament says this:

Malachi 4: (ESV)

⁴ "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.

⁵ "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of YHWH comes. ⁶ And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

And some of those verses, are almost identical to the words the angel gave Zechariah. It leaves us in no doubt: The Lord is coming. But John the Baptist (in the vein of Elijah), would proclaim repentance, to prepare God's people before the coming of God **on** the Day of Judgment.

So:

- the name of John means “YHWH has been gracious”.
- The **role** of John, was to be God’s prophet, which means the message of John, was God’s word to the people of Israel.
- The **specific** message of John, would be a message of preparation – “Get right with God before He comes on the Day of Judgment”

Now, the thing is, John the Baptist came to Israel. Israel were already God’s covenant people... But their religion had become so perverted, that when the Son of God appeared, it was their perverted **religion** that had him killed-off... Does that give you a bit of a heads-up as to how corrupted the worship of God had become? It was so corrupt, that when God came into their presence, it did not receive Him – He made them uncomfortable, and so they did away with Him.

The Angel Gabriel had said to Zechariah, **he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.** And John did. He preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And that’s what “repentance” is – it is a turning. It’s a turning from what we believe, but it’s also a turning from what we do. John never watered-down the message of repentance – it always had the practical aspect to it – stop doing evil, and start doing good...

V17 says that he would turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just ...

And that's what the Gospel does. The fruit of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, is reconciliation...

In repentance and in Christ Jesus, there is reconciliation between us and God. There is a reconciliation for families – families who have been busted apart in bitterness; and unforgiveness; and prideful unyielding and ongoing blame – — In repentance, and in faith in Jesus, those families can be reconciled and bonded together in the love of God....

I believe this, because God's word says it. He would turn the hearts of the fathers to the children

And there's reconciliation for the sinner... He would turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the just

True repentance & true saving faith, is all about the reconciliation of a sinner, to a holy God. In the Lord Jesus Christ, God doesn't only take away our sins, or cancel them – by His Holy Spirit, He transforms us – we who **were** the disobedient – He transforms us to be a people who delight in the justice and the righteousness of God...

If you ever doubt the power of the Gospel to change a life, then you need to meet someone who has been genuinely transformed, from a life of vile, corrupt evil, ,, to the righteousness of God.

But why??? What's the purpose of John? to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

Once again, we go to Malachi, this time, Chapter 3.

Malachi 3: (ESV)

"Behold, I send my messenger (John the Baptist), and he will prepare the way before me (God). And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant (Jesus?) in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap.

This is where it's easy to get mixed up, and John himself got mixed up... You see, at one point, John sent a couple of **his** disciples to Jesus with a question, "Are you the one who is to come? Or should we be looking for another?"

You see, John was expecting Jesus to come in judgment, and He will... John could see forwards to the **2nd** coming of Jesus, not the **1st** coming... He was looking forward to the time

when God would come to His temple, and who will be able to stand on that day????

At Jesus' **first** coming, as He set foot in His temple, we caught a tiny little glimpse of the fury of God, when he made a whip out of cords and drove the dishonest traders out...

And the religious leaders of the temple, within short-order, thought they got their payback, when they had Jesus crucified.

But boy-o-boy, when Jesus returns again, this time as judge, who can endure that day????

And so, the message of John, is **to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.**

But you know what? That's also the message of Jesus...

- John preached a message of repentance, for the forgiveness of sins.
- What did Jesus preach? A message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.
- What did the Apostles preach? A message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.
- And what do we preach? We **must** preach, A message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins...

make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

I do know a little bit about preparing – making ready...

You know the saying, “The difference between a good farmer and a bad farmer, is an inch of rain”? Sorta true... A bit of extra rain can make up for a multitude of poor farming practices.

*But I can tell you, this is definitely true: “The difference between a consistently good farmer, and a consistently **bad** farmer, is “preparedness” or “lack of preparedness” ...*

One farmer kills the weeds when they’re young, and well before they go to seed. The bad farmer, wonders why there’s no moisture in his soil, and why he always has so many weeds to deal with. It’s because he let them go to seed last time, and he neglected to kill them before they sucked all the moisture out.

A good farmer has his seed-bed prepared, and his planter is ready to go, at exactly the right time... The ill-prepared farmer gets his planting rain and his planter’s not ready, and the soil tilth is all wrong, and he plants late and he plants it rough, and winges that the germination was no good...

Preparedness/lack of preparedness – the difference between success and failure.

Most of you know that I used to be an instructor at the Dalby Ag College... The college was supposed to be a show-piece –

a neat and tidy farm... Embarrassingly, most of the time, it was not. We were pulled in too many different directions, to have the perfect farm...

But one day a year, the farm was perfect.

I'm trying to remember if it was August or September, every year, would be the DAC open day...

And in the weeks leading up to that,

- *the chip-hoes would be chipping, and my hands would be calloused;*
- *slashers would be slashing the water-ways;*
- *boom-sprays would have dealt with the weeds in the crops;*
- *the fallows would be sprayed or cultivated;*
- *the lawn-mowers would be manicuring the facilities;*
- *every piece of machinery would be washed;*
- *some years, the tractors would get a polish;*

That one time, every year, that farm truly was a show-piece...

Get ready; Be prepared – open day is coming... Nothing else was more important...

Well, this ain't no open-day, folks – it's much more important than that... **Be a people prepared – the Lord our God is coming...**

When the Lord Jesus Christ returns (on the Day of Judgment), will you be ready?

“John”, means YHWH has been gracious... And the ultimate expression of the graciousness of God, was Him sending His one and only Son, to be born as the most fragile of His creatures, to suffer and die, to make us ready for His coming...

This is how God makes us ready. Jesus was crucified for you and for me.

How can we make ready for the Lord? How can we **be** a people prepared???

Repentance, and believing/trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of sins. That’s where it begins. We can’t be saved by trying to be good – that ship has sailed. The only way to be saved/be prepared/ready, is by submitting to Jesus as Lord, and crying out for the mercy of God...

But the message of John also reminds us, that **we** are a covenant people of God. **John** was sent to the people of the Old Covenant – The Old Covenant depended on the sacrificial system for the forgiveness of sins... **We’ve** been baptised into the New Covenant – Jesus is the one and only sacrifice, by which we are saved...

And one of the benefits of the New Covenant, is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and the Godliness that flows from that.

In Malachi, God's 'pet-hate', was the way that those who were **supposed** to be His people, and especially those who are **supposed** to be close to God, were vile. They were Godless; evil; faithless; despised; abased; dishonest; impure....

My friends, we have been saved by the precious shed blood of Jesus; and He loves us so much, He wants us to be transformed – to be a people who ooze Godliness and righteousness...

Jesus sent His Holy Spirit, to live in us, that we might live for Him, in all Godliness; and goodness; and righteousness...

That's what it means to be a people prepared:

Saved by grace/faith in the Lord Jesus.

And to **live** by faith, in the power of God; and for the glory of God...

Be ready for the coming of Jesus....

When Jesus came the first time, those who were **supposed** to be in covenant relationship with Him, were not ready. When Jesus comes for us, will **we** be ready?

Are you ready for the coming of Jesus?

Pray with me now, but it is **not** merely a matter of words.

This "repentance" –is a whole change of life. Only pray these words if you mean it.

I'm actually going to put the prayer up on the screen. If the Holy Spirit has got a hold of you today, pray these words, and mean it. This is a day of turning/preparing.

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father,
We thank You for Your Son,
Jesus Christ.

We are so undeserving;
I have been evil.
I've done evil;
I've thought evil;
I've spoken evil;
I've planned evil;
and I've even admired evil...

God, forgive me.

Lord,
I don't want to live for myself any more –
I've made a right mess of it.

Up until now,
I've been putting myself as number 1,
but now I yield to You.
Have mercy on me.

And I thank You,
that the name "John" says it all,
YHWH has been gracious.

I thank You for Your grace.
I thank You that Jesus came;
that He was born in the most humbling
of circumstances.

And I thank You,
that in His great love,
He gave Himself unto death on the cross.

Lord, forgive me,
and I thank You for Your forgiveness.

And Lord, I pray for a miracle.
I pray that You would re-create me –
that You would change/transform me,
from a person of wickedness and darkness,
and make me a person of righteousness and light.

Make me a person prepared,
for the coming of my King,
For the Glory of God,

Amen