



# John Prepares the Way for the Lord

Matthew 3:1–12



## LESSON GOAL

The student will understand what true, fruit-bearing repentance is.

## BIBLE TRUTHS

- John was dressed in camel hair clothes and a leather belt and ate locust and honey.
- John would not baptize the Pharisees and Sadducees because they were not repentant.
- John said that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

## KEY VERSE

“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” —*Matthew 3:11*

## APPLICATION

- Obey Jesus the King.
- Ask yourself if you are bearing fruit.
- Warn others of coming judgment.

## NEXT WEEK

John Baptizes Jesus  
Matthew 3:13–17

### Symbol Key



Craft



Finger Play



Memory Verse



Object Lesson



Game



Visual Aid



Center



Activity



Q & A



4 Age Group

# Teacher Planning Sheet

## PREPARE

Objectives/Truths to cover this week

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

### Personal Application

*As a result of my study in this passage, God wants me to...*

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

*Three ways students need to apply this passage are...*

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

**Materials  
Needed:**

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## POINT

*Choose from various ideas to point them to the coming Bible lesson.*

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

## PROCLAIM

*Choose from various ideas to proclaim the Bible lesson.*

### Presentation Ideas

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

### Praise/Music Ideas

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

## PRACTICE

*Choose ideas to help review and apply today's lesson.*

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

## PREPARE WITH THE TRUTH

*“Therefore you shall lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul... you shall teach them to your children.” —Deuteronomy 11:18–19*

Please take time to prepare your mind and heart to accurately handle the truths of God’s Word (2 Tim. 2:15). Read through the Bible background and study the truths contained in this lesson. Crucial background information is included here that will aid you in understanding the Scripture.

### Bible Background

#### Introduction

The Bible says surprisingly little about Jesus’ youth. After His family settled in Nazareth (Matt. 2:23), the only record of Jesus’ childhood is Luke’s description of His trip to Jerusalem when He was twelve. Luke’s evaluation of Jesus’ youth is beautiful in its simplicity: “Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men” (Luke 2:52). Instead of elaborating on Jesus’ youth, Matthew’s presentation of the Gospel jumps from Jesus’ settlement in Nazareth to the preaching of John the Baptist. God prophesied through the prophet Isaiah that He would prepare His people for their King by sending “the voice of one crying in the wilderness” (Matt. 3:3). John the Baptist was that voice. Just as he called the people of Israel to repentance, John’s preaching warns today’s readers to “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (3:2).

#### John the Baptist Preaches in the Wilderness (Matt. 3:1–6)

Even before his birth, John the Baptist was set aside as a herald of the coming King. After telling Zacharias that he and his wife would have a child (both of whom were old), an angel of the Lord told Zacharias that the child would be “filled with the spirit, even from his mother’s womb” (Luke 1:15). From birth, John would be set apart and controlled by God to accomplish a specific purpose. God would use his preaching “to turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God” (Luke 1:16). But the child would become more than a prophet preaching repentance. He himself would be the fulfillment of prophecy. The angel told Zacharias that John would “go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children’ and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17). The angel’s message clearly shows that John was the Elijah prophesied in the final two verses of the Old Testament (Mal. 4:5–6). John’s message of repentance would help “make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” All four Gospels point to John as being the fulfillment of a similar prophecy in Isaiah 40:3: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’” The apostle John was like a herald who traveled before a king making sure that the king’s way was easily traveled and announcing the king’s approach. John’s prophetic role was to prepare Israel’s heart for their coming King.

John’s message was centered around preparing the people of Israel for their King. As a prophet of the Lord, he commanded the people, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matt. 2:2). Repentance means more than changing one’s mind or feeling bad for what one has done. Although it does include sorrow, repentance is the radical turning away from sin and turning to righteousness. John’s message came with motivation: the kingdom of heaven was at hand. The kingdom of

heaven, like the synonymous expression the kingdom of God, refers to the sphere of God's dominion over those who belong to Him. It has both a present reality in those whose hearts have embraced Christ as King and submitted to His rule and a future reality in which Christ will rule a literal kingdom on earth. The kingdom was "at hand" because Jesus, the coming King, was about to begin His public ministry. The arrival of the kingdom of heaven was motivation to repent because the kingdom, in its final form, is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, including judgment of those who are God's enemies. Those who have not submitted to God's reign in Christ should indeed fear the coming of His kingdom.

Everything about John added to the urgency and authority of His message. John preached in the wilderness of Judea (Matt. 3:1), a barren desert west of the Dead Sea. Jews from Jerusalem who wanted to hear his confronting message of repentance needed to travel a full day's walk into the desert. When they came to the desert, there was nothing impressive about John's appearance. He was dressed in rough "camel's hair, with a leather belt around the waist" (3:4). Not only were these clothes long-lasting and practical for desert life, but they also were visibly reminiscent of Elijah (2 Kings 1:8) and were the traditional garments worn by prophets (Zech. 13:4). Although not uncommon among poor people, his diet of "locusts and wild honey" (Matt. 3:5) emphasized how different John the Baptist was from most Jews, especially the prosperous Jewish leaders. John's physical appearance and unusual lifestyle were a visible reminder of the desperate, spiritual condition, which characterized most Jews. The Jews needed to repent, humble themselves inwardly, and forsake their self-love just as John had humbled himself outwardly.

John's preaching of repentance was accompanied by the sign of baptism. As "Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him," they were "baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins" (Matt. 3:6). When Jews responded to John's message, they admitted their spiritual bankruptcy by being baptized. Baptism was normally administered to Gentiles who wanted to proselytize to Judaism. By being baptized, Gentiles admitted that they desired to be counted among the people of God. For a Jew to be baptized was the most profound admission that they were unworthy of being admitted into God's kingdom. The Jews whom John baptized had humbly forsaken a misplaced confidence in being the descendants of Abraham and instead cast themselves before the throne of a gracious God.

### **John the Baptist Rebukes False Repentance (Matt. 3:7–10)**

When the reputation of John as a prophet grew, John saw "many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism" (Matt. 3:7). The Pharisees were a small sect of Jews who added a multitude of rules to God's Law in an attempt to not break any of His commands. They took pride in the fact that they were more religious and obedient than other Jews. The Sadducees tended to be aristocratic and powerful because of their willingness to cooperate with the Roman Empire. They were known for their rejection of supernaturalism and their opposition to the Pharisee's legalism. Neither group was spiritually healthy, although both thought they were. Their arrival to be baptized by John may suggest that they believed he was a prophet, that they wanted to be ready for the Messianic kingdom, or that they wanted to meet the public's expectations. Regardless of their reason, John knew that they lacked spiritual brokenness and a willingness to repent.

When John saw the Pharisees and Sadducees, he rebuked them for their hypocrisy. He called them a "brood of vipers" to highlight the dangerous nature of their religious facade (3:7). Their desire to be baptized without repentance was a deadly poison to both their own hearts and the hearts of those they led. John rhetorically

questioned them: “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” Unlike other Jews who had actually feared God’s wrath and repented, the Pharisees and Sadducees thought they were in no danger of judgment. If they had realized their sin, John’s message of a coming kingdom would have been a warning. But their hardened, self-righteous hearts had sensed no need to flee from God’s wrath and trust in God’s grace. Because they had never really been warned, their desire for baptism was an empty hoax, a worthless ritual.

Although he could not guarantee their response, John the Baptist did not let the Pharisees and Sadducees leave without calling them to repentance. Instead of relying upon their Jewish descent as an immediate pass into heaven, John challenged them to “bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Matt. 3:8). The Jewish leaders would know the reality of their repentance when they humbled themselves before God and obeyed His Law. John warned that they should not deceive themselves that obedience was unnecessary because Abraham was their father (3:9). God was able to “raise up children to Abraham from these stones” (3:9). The Jewish leaders thought that they were ensured the kingdom because they were descended from Abraham, but John warned that God would sooner create spiritual children from stones than accept the self-righteousness of the Jews. The Jewish leaders were nothing like Abraham and not related to him spiritually (Gal. 3:7, 29). Not only could God raise up spiritual children for Abraham (as He had from the Gentiles), but the Jews were also in danger of being destroyed. John warned: “And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matt. 3:10). The time of judgment was approaching. A fruitless life was one waiting to be chopped down and burned in hell.

### **John the Baptist Proclaims Christ’s Greatness (Matt. 3:11–12)**

Following closely upon the pronouncement of coming judgment, John the Baptist focused his attention on the one through whom both salvation and judgment would come, the King whose Kingdom John preached. John unabashedly proclaimed the greatness of Christ. He said, “He whose coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry” (Matt. 3:11). John understood he was unworthy even to take off the shoes of his Master, a job which was traditionally performed by the lowliest of slaves. John did not want the glory belonging to the King but was content to prepare His way.

Just as the person of Christ was incomparably greater than the person of John, the baptism of Christ was greater than the baptism of John. The baptism of John was “with water unto repentance” (3:11). John’s baptism was only an outward expression of an inner change. But when Jesus came, John prophesied that Jesus would “baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (3:11). After the death and resurrection of Christ, the Holy Spirit was outpoured on believers, thus ushering them into the body of Christ (Acts 2:1–4; 8:5–17; 10:44–48; 19:1–7). Since the end of Acts, all believers have been baptized with the Holy Spirit at the time of salvation into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). While the baptism of the Spirit is for salvation, the baptism of fire is a baptism of judgment. John further described the baptism of fire with the image of harvesting grain in verse 12. Ancient farmers would use a winnowing fork to throw a pile of wheat and chaff from the threshing floor into the air. While the lighter chaff would blow away in the wind, the heavier grain would fall back to the ground and be gathered into the barn. John said that Jesus “will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:12). Whoever was not rescued through the Spirit’s baptism would be punished in the fire of hell. Although the final separation of wheat and chaff will not happen until Christ’s second coming (Matt. 25:46), every person will either be saved through Spirit’s baptism or punished through the baptism of fire.

## Conclusion

John's call to genuine, fruit-bearing repentance is as valid today as it was two thousand years ago. Like the Pharisees and Sadducees who came for baptism, many have outwardly confessed their need of salvation but have not yet humbly submitted to the lordship of Christ. To them, John's warning is just as valid: the axe is still at the root of the trees. The King is coming to establish His kingdom on earth and to separate the wheat from the chaff. Those who will not humble themselves will be destroyed in fire. Any one who claims Christ as their King but does not bear fruit will be baptized with fire.

## POINT TO THE TRUTH

*"Give ear, O my people, to my law; incline your ears to the words of my mouth."  
—Psalm 78:1*

This section includes questions to review last week's lesson and ideas to prepare students for this week's lesson. Choose from the following ideas to point to the truths of this lesson.



### Review Questions

What place were both King Herod and the wise men looking for?  
*Where Jesus was born.*

How did the priests and the teachers of the law respond to the arrival of Jesus?  
*The chief priests and scribes ignore the coming of Jesus the Messiah.*

What led the wise men to the King of the Jews?  
*God appointed a star to direct the wise men to the place where Jesus was living.*

How did the wise men respond to the birth of Jesus?  
*They were overjoyed (5:10), and sought to worship Him with the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (5:11).*

How did God protect His Son Jesus after the wise men left from worshipping Him?  
*God gave Joseph a dream, warning him to flee Israel and escape to Egypt with his family.*

How did King Herod respond to Jesus?  
*Herod despised Jesus and tried to kill Him.*

After Herod died, how did God again protect Jesus and His family?  
*God spoke to Joseph in another dream and told him that it was safe to return to Israel.*

How did the wise men and Herod respond to Jesus in Matthew 2?  
*The wise men responded correctly by worshipping Jesus, and King Herod responded incorrectly by wanting to kill Him.*





### **Don't Judge a Book by its Cover**

Explain why John rejected the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism. To illustrate the concept "fruit of repentance," pose a test before the students. Setting out several items on a table (i.e., apple, bar of soap, sponge, etc.), label each item with a label that correctly identifies one of the other items. After labeling them incorrectly, ask the students to verify whether or not the item is truly what its label identifies it to be. As they respond 'no' to each item, ask them how they can be sure that they know what each item is (i.e. tasting the apple, smelling the soap, squeezing the sponge). In drawing out each of their observations, point out that these are characteristics of each of the objects on the table. They can tell what each item is based on its defining characteristics (i.e. an apple will taste sweet, the soap will smell nice, and the sponge will be squeezable). These characteristics are the fruit, or evidence, of its of what it is. In the same way, the Pharisees and Sadducees had no evidence in their life of repentance. They had come to John for baptism without having repented of their sins. Since baptism is an outward expression of this repentance, John was able to refuse their request for baptism. Because they lacked the fruit of repentance, John knew that they did not truly want the Christ as their Messiah and King.



### **Who's Your Dad?**

Have several of the children tell you who their fathers are, and what they do for a living. As some of the children tell how their fathers are firemen, bankers, policemen, etc., ask whether or not that makes them a firefighter, banker, policeman, etc. Take this time to explain how their dad being a firefighter does not make them a firefighter as well. In the same way, just because our dads are going to heaven does not mean we are going to heaven. We, like the Pharisees and Sadducees, are instructed to rely on Jesus the Messiah for salvation, not our fathers. John the Baptist rebuked the Pharisees and Sadducees for relying on their father Abraham for salvation. Because Abraham could not save them from their sins, they were going to be judged with the baptism of fire.



### **Welcome to the Kingdom**

Hang butcher paper on the wall with a large castle drawn, colored, and decorated. Use this mural as you talk about what to expect in a king and a kingdom.

## PROCLAIM THE TRUTH

*"Telling to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, and His strength and His wonderful works that He has done." —Psalm 78:4*

This section includes the Bible lesson, lesson questions, and praise and worship ideas. Song suggestions are included that you can use to proclaim your worship to God. Use the lesson questions to check the students' understanding. This section also includes various presentation ideas to use alongside the teaching time. Read the Bible passage several times before you read these pages. All teaching should be done right from the Bible.

### Bible Lesson

About the time that Jesus was born, there was another boy who was born who also fulfilled a prophecy. His name was John the Baptist. There is a prophecy that said God would send someone who would prepare the people's hearts for the Lord. This prophecy is found in the book of Malachi, but an angel also told John the Baptist's parents that their child was given to them to do a special work for the Lord.

When John grew up, he did what God had made him to do by preparing the world for Jesus Christ. He had an important message to preach, and people came from all over to hear him preach it. He would cry out "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (3:2). John warned the people to stop sinning and to start doing what was right. Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords was here on earth. He drew crowds because His message was so different from what the Jewish leaders were teaching, but also because he looked and acted differently. He dressed in a large piece of camel's hair and a leather belt. He ate locust (bugs) and honey. This helped the Jews to see John as very different from the finely dressed Pharisees and Sadducees, but it also reminded the Jewish people of the prophet Elijah. Elijah had dressed and acted in a similar way. The prophecy in Malachi said that Elijah would come to prepare the way for the Lord, and John the Baptist was the new Elijah for the Jews.

John had a very successful ministry. Many people came to hear his message, repent of their sin, and be baptized by John. This was very different from anything that the Jews had ever done before. The only people that had been baptized before this time were people who were not born Jews, but wanted to become Jewish. They were baptized because it showed that they were not clean enough to enter heaven, but had to become clean by being baptized. The Jews thought that they were already clean and worthy to enter heaven just because they were Jews. Being baptized by John showed that they understood that being Jewish would not get them into heaven, but repenting of their sin would.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees started coming to watch the baptisms. When John noticed them, he said, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' ...Therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (3:7-11). A brood of vipers is a bunch of poisonous snakes and that is what John called the Jewish leaders! They were poisoning the minds of the Jews with lies. He knew that they were not there to hear his message and repent. He warned them that those who did not repent of their sin would be cast into hell. To repent means to stop sinning and start doing what is right. He said it would be like a tree that did not bear good



fruit. Those trees would get cut down and burned. The Pharisees and Sadducees did not repent of their sins.

John had a further warning and message for them. He told them of the coming of Jesus Christ. He said, "He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

John's message is just as important today. People must repent from their sins and show that they have repented by obeying the Lord. Those who do not repent and trust Christ to save them from their sins will not go to heaven but will be sent to hell.



## Lesson Questions

Who did Isaiah say would come and what would he do?

*Isaiah said that a man would call out in the desert, "Prepare the way for the Lord" (Isa. 40:3)." John was the man who Isaiah was talking about.*

How was John dressed and what did he eat?

*John's clothes were made out of camel's hair and leather. He ate locusts and honey.*

Why did the people come to hear John preach in the desert?

*The way John looked reminded the people of the prophet Isaiah. John preached that the kingdom of heaven was near.*

What were people saying when they were baptized?

*Baptism with water is an outward sign of their obedience to God.*

What were the Pharisees and Sadducees trusting in to go to heaven?

*They were trusting that they would be allowed into heaven because of their father's faith.*

Why wouldn't John baptize the Pharisees and Sadducees?

*They did not fear God, or think that their sins were worthy of being judged.*

Who was the One that John said would come after him and would be greater than him?

*Jesus*

What is this baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire?

*Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit was His giving eternal life (salvation) to those whom were repentant. To those who were unrepentant, he was going to baptize with fire with punishment in Hell.*

## Presentation Ideas



### **A Beka Book® Flash-A-Cards®**

Use appropriate A Beka Book® Flash-A-Cards® with the lesson.



### **Betty Lukens Flannel Graph**

Use appropriate flannel graph pieces with the lesson.



### **By the Jordan River**

Since John's preaching usually took place by the Jordan river, choose one of the following for a visual during lesson time:

- 1) Set up a small fountain with the sound of water
- 2) Spread butcher paper colored blue or blue Saran wrap down the center aisle. Helpers can shake it a little from each end to make it wavy sometimes.



### **Ready for the King**

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



### **Baptized in the Spirit**

John declared that Christ would not only baptize with water, but with the Holy Spirit and fire. To baptize means literally "to immerse." What does someone who has been immersed in water look like? Bring a sponge to class and dip it in water to show the children. What does someone who has been immersed in fire look like? Bring a log which has been charred in the fire to show the children. What does someone look like who has been baptized (immersed) in the Holy Spirit? They look like Christ. We cannot see the Holy Spirit, but, as with the wet sponge and the burned log, we can see whether someone has been baptized in the Spirit by the effect it produces. Such a person will demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit.

### **Praise and Worship**

*Lord, I Lift Your Name On High*

*God Is So Good*

*In My Life*

## PRACTICE THE TRUTH

*"That they may set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments." —Psalm 78:7*

Choose ideas from this section that review and apply the truths of the Bible lesson.



### Prophecy Megaphone

Materials: Photocopy of craft pages on cardstock, scissors, glue, crayons

Directions: Pass out cardstock pages and scissors to each student. Instruct students to cut out the megaphone shape, including the handle, and each of the three banners. Students may decorate the megaphone to give it the appearance of the desert of Judea by adding sand, the sun, cacti, and other appropriate drawings. After the students finish coloring the megaphone, instruct them to glue the three banners, phrases that John the Baptist emphasized while preaching, to the right edge of the megaphone. Model how to place glue on the banner where it is states "glue here," and then stick it to the back side of the megaphone. Space the three banners evenly from top to bottom (order is not important). It should look like the words are projecting from the end of the megaphone. Use the megaphone to review the important teachings of John the Baptist given in the lesson.



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### Kingdom of Heaven Sphere

Materials: Copies of craft pages on cardstock, scissors, crayons, glue

Directions: Pass out the craft pages. On the first page, instruct students to cut around the outer edge of the Kingdom of Heaven, leaving the two half circles on each side attached. On the second page, instruct students to cut around the globe, and then down the center to cut it into two halves. Instruct the students to fold the half circles into the full circle to cover up the writing. Then, show the students how to glue the two globe halves onto the half circles (blank side). Use the sphere to help students understand the definition of Kingdom of Heaven used throughout the book of Matthew.



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### Who Means It?

Have several teachers act out a scenario that has supposedly just followed a big fight. Each of the actors are to approach their friend for forgiveness. All of the actors except one should make it obvious that they are not really sorry for what they have done (i.e., smirking to where their friend can not see, crossing their fingers, blaming their friend in the midst of their apology, etc.). The other teacher should exemplify genuine remorse for what they have done, and that they desire their friend's forgiveness. At the end of the dramatization, ask the students how they are able to tell who was genuinely sorry, or repentant. Take this time to connect John's ability to observe the false repentance of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Their lives revealed that they neither feared God or His judgment. Because of this, their request for baptism was meaningless.



### Dead or Alive

Bring into the classroom two plants of the same kind. One of the plants is to be either dead (fruitless, mangled, etc.) and the other should be alive (full of fruit, healthy, etc.). Have the students observe which plant is dead, and which one is alive. They should be able to tell how they have derived their conclusion. Take this

time to note how John was able to discern the spiritual status of the Pharisees and Sadducees. John was able to tell that they were not genuinely repentant because their lives did not show it. They neither feared God nor His judgment and because of this were not worthy of being baptized.

### **Coloring Pages**

Give each student a copy of the coloring sheets at the back of the lesson. He/she can color the pages in class or take them home to color.



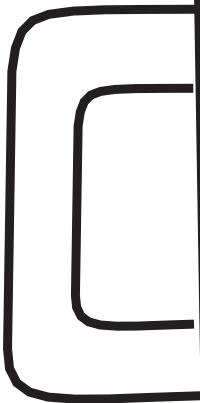
### **MEMORY VERSE**

“...’Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!’” —*Matthew 3:2*

# Prophecy Megaphone

**John the Baptist Fulfills Prophecy**

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness...” —Isaiah 40:3







# Prophecy Megaphone

Glue  
here

**Repent**

Glue  
here

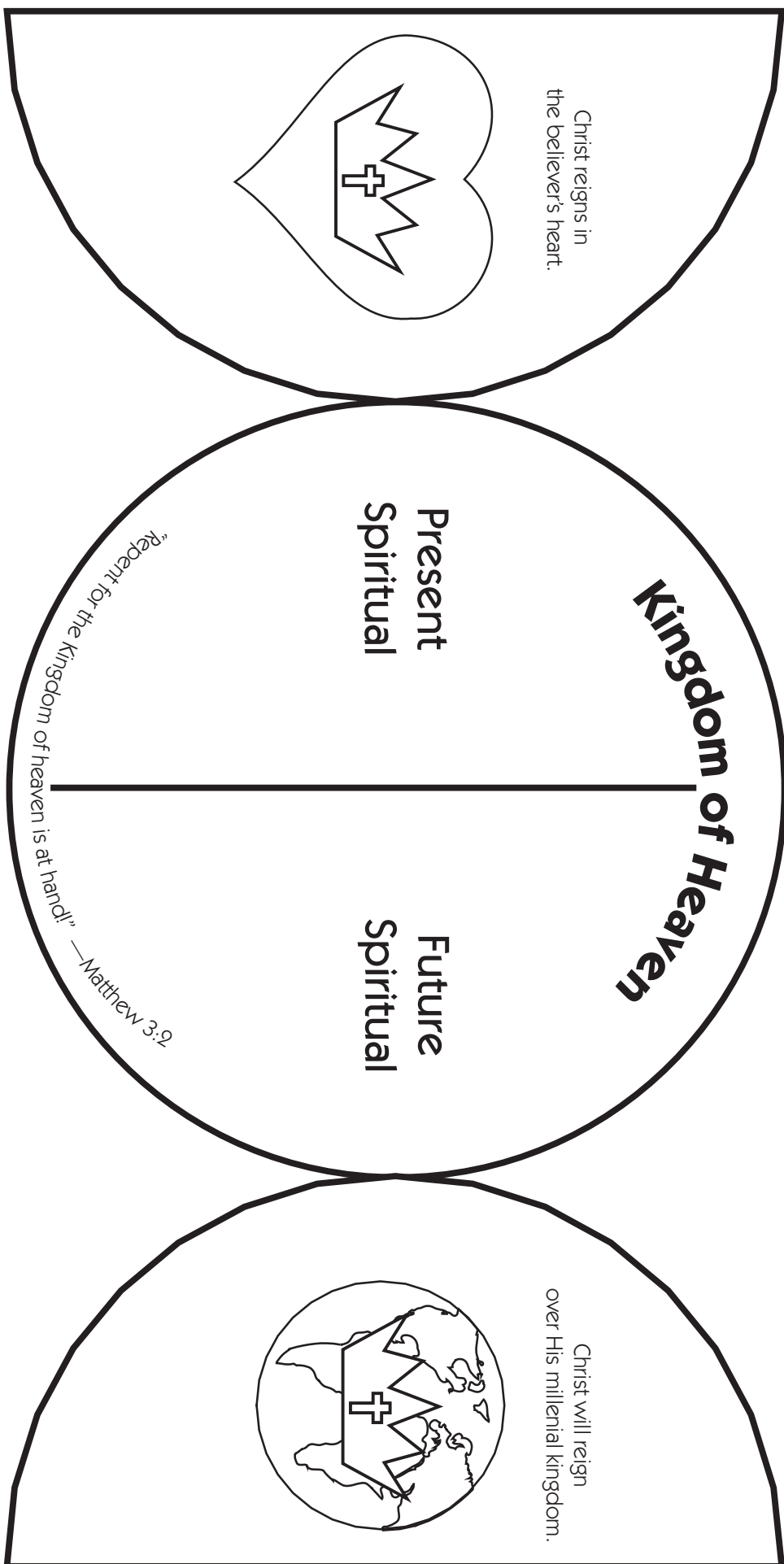
**Bear Fruit**

Glue  
here

**Kingdom of Heaven**



# Kingdom of Heaven





# Kingdom of Heaven



Cut around outer edge and down the center.







**“In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!’”**

**—Matthew 3:1-2**





**“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**

