

Matthew Chapter 3

Matthew 3:1 "In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea,"

The forerunner of Christ was "John the Baptist." He was the son of Zechariah and Elisabeth, and a cousin of the Lord (Luke 1:5-80). His birth was accompanied by the promise "He shall be great in the sight of the Lord ... and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost" (Luke 1:15).

Jesus said of him that there was none "greater than John" (Matt. 11:11), during the Old Testament dispensation. This would imply that John the Baptist was the epitome of the message of the Old Testament itself. Matthew's reference to John the Baptist assumes that his readers were familiar with him.

John is presented as the prophet sent in the spirit of Elijah "before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord" (Mal. 4:5). His appearance and dynamic preaching certainly depict him in the life-style of Israel's ancient prophet. Jesus would later say of him, "I say unto you, that Elijah is come already" (Matt. 17:12).

The name "John" means the Lord is gracious. What a wonderful name for someone who would proclaim the arrival of the King of Grace (Jesus the Christ). The rest of his name, the Baptist, just meant that he was the baptizer.

Israelites had practiced a form of baptism for years. It was used as a symbol of being purified from sin by older customs. The washings in the Temple really were a form of baptism.

John also, was teaching in a different way. He was not in the temple, but wherever there were people and water to baptize those people in. That was where he preached. He preached mostly in an area near Jericho and near the Jordan River.

This "wilderness" did not mean an area heavily wooded, or like the jungles. It just meant it was out of the populated areas. It, also, meant that he was out where the ordinary people were. The region was to the immediate West of the Dead Sea, an utterly barren desert.

The Jewish sect of the Essenes had significant communities in this region. But there is no biblical evidence to suggest that John was in any way connected with that sect. John seems to have preached near the northern end of this region, close by where the Jordan flows into the Dead Sea (verse 6).

This was a full day's journey from Jerusalem and seems an odd location to announce the arrival of a king. But it is perfectly in keeping with God's ways (1 Cor. 1:26-29).

Matthew 3:2 "And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

His message was a simple one. Repent. Today that message is needed as the first step toward becoming a Christian. You see, unless we are truly sorry and repentant for our sins, we probably will not turn from them and begin a brand new life with Jesus.

Repent means a change of mind resulting in a change of conduct. Repentance is not merely sorrow. It involves a complete change of attitude regarding God and sin and is often accompanied by a sense of sorrow and a corresponding change in conduct.

Such repentance does not arise within man himself, but is the result of God's mercy in leading man to it (Acts 5:31; Rom. 2:4; 2 Tim. 2:25). Thus repentance involves the very process of conversion whereby men are born again. John's message of repentance was necessary in order to prepare people for the "kingdom of heaven" which was "at hand".

The phrase kingdom of heaven is used only in the Gospel of Matthew and seems to be based on similar reference in the Book of Daniel. The phrase kingdom of God is used more frequently by Mark and Luke.

The change is perhaps due to Matthew's Jewish emphasis. Since many Jews regarded it as blasphemous to refer to God by name, Matthew may have substituted the word heaven for that reason. Usually the two phrases are used interchangeably in the Gospels.

In a society that believes everything is relative and there are no absolutes, we seldom see true repentance.

John's next statement fits our day just as well as the day in which John was preaching. Truly the kingdom of heaven is at hand. In one sense the kingdom is a present reality, but in its fullest sense it awaits a yet-future fulfillment. There have been preachers ever since John bringing this same message. God never changes, and neither does His message.

Verses 3-7: "Spoken of by the prophet Isaiah:" All four Gospels relate this prophecy to a fulfillment in the life and ministry of John the Baptist (Mark 1:2; Luke 3:4; John 1:23).

"Make his paths straight" refers to the straightening or preparing of one's life in a right relationship with God in order to prepare for the coming of a King. John's dress of "camel's hair, and a leathern girdle" was similar to Elijah's clothing (2 King 1:8), and was the usual dress of prophets (Zech. 13:4).

"Locusts" were an allowable food (Lev. 11:22), and were eaten by the poorest of people. The reference in (verse 5), to "Jerusalem and all Judea" relates to the people of those places. John's ministry was received with great enthusiasm in its early stages.

Matthew 3:3 "For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

"Spoken of by the prophet Isaiah": John's message had long ago been described (in Isaiah 40:3-5). All four of the gospels cite this passage as a prophecy pointing to John the Baptist. Isaiah prophesied that there would be one proclaiming the arrival of Christ.

Matthew 3:4 "And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey."

Verse 4 brings a message of the simple life John lived, not one dressed in finery. The appearance was simple, but he brought the most important message. John was not concerned about what he wore, or what he had to eat, just enough to sustain him.

“His raiment of camel’s hair”: Practical and long wearing clothes, but far from comfortable or fashionable, John evokes the image of Elijah (2 Kings 1:8), and the Israelites were expecting Elijah before the Day of the Lord (Mal. 4:5).

“Locusts”: These were an allowed food (Lev. 11:22).

Matthew 3:5 "Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan,"

Even though he was not dressed in finery, his message was an exciting one, and people from all the surrounding area came to hear this man speak.

Matthew 3:6 "And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins."

“Baptized”: The symbolism of John’s baptism likely had its roots in Old Testament rituals (Lev. 15:13). Baptism had also long been administered to Gentile proselytes coming into Judaism. The baptism of John thus powerfully and dramatically symbolized repentance.

Jews accepting John’s baptism were admitting they had been as Gentiles and needed to become the people of God genuinely, inwardly (an amazing admission, given their hatred of Gentiles). The people were repenting in anticipation of the Messiah’s arrival. The meaning of John’s baptism differs somewhat from Christian baptism (Acts 18:25).

Actually, Christian baptism altered the significance of the ritual, symbolizing the believer’s identification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6:3; Col 2:12).

His message was a commanding message. They were sure his message was true. It seems that many confessed their sins and were baptized. We will see later on, that this was a different type of baptism. After Jesus, baptism became a symbol of death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

When you go under the water, it symbolizes being buried with Him; and when you come out of the water, it symbolizes rising from the grave with Him.

Matthew 3:7 "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

The Pharisees and Sadducees were hung up in tradition. The Pharisees were what we would call the people of the middle class today. The Sadducees were from the upper class, and some from high-priest families. The law was everything to them. They really thought themselves better than just the average person. They were righteous in their own sight.

There were about 6,000, legalistic sect of the Jews who were known for their rigid adherence to the ceremonial fine points of the law. Their name means “separated one.” Jesus’ interaction with the Pharisees was usually adversarial. He rebuked them for using human tradition to nullify Scripture.

When John called them "generation of vipers", he really was revealing their hidden sins. They were Self-proclaimed experts. He knew their personality and knew that from these groups would come much opposition to Jesus.

The Sadducees were known for their denial of things supernatural. They denied the resurrection of the dead (22:23), and the existence of angels (Acts 23:8). Unlike the Pharisees, they rejected human tradition and scorned legalism. They accepted only the Pentateuch as authoritative. They tended to be wealthy, aristocratic members of the priestly tribe, and in the days of Herod their sect controlled the temple, though they were fewer in number than the Pharisees.

Pharisees and Sadducees had little in common. Pharisees were ritualists; Sadducees were rationalists. Pharisees were legalists; Sadducees were liberals. Pharisees were separatists; Sadducees were compromisers and political opportunists. Yet they united together in their opposition to Christ (22:15-6, 23-24, 35). John publicly addressed them as deadly snakes.

“The wrath to come”: John’s preaching echoed the familiar Old Testament theme of promised wrath in the Day of the Lord (Ezek. 7:19; Zep. 1:18). This must have been a particularly stinging rebuke to the Jewish leaders, who imagined that divine wrath was reserved only for non-Jews.

Verses 8-10: “Fruits meet for repentance:” John rebuked the Pharisees, asking them to give evidence of “fruits meet for repentance” (verse 8). There can be no doubt that the New Testament concept of repentance grows out of its usage in the Old Testament, where the term (Hebrew Shub), means far more than an intellectual change of mind.

Genuine repentance proves itself by the fruits of a changed life. John the Baptist further rebuked them for their belief in nationalistic salvation.

“Abraham to our father” means that they were trusting in their physical descent for salvation, rather than in God, which would have constituted a spiritual relationship to Abraham the “father of the faithful.”

Matthew 3:8 "Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance:"

Repentance itself is not a work, but works are its inevitable fruit. Repentance and faith are inextricably linked in Scripture. Repentance means turning from one’s sin, and faith is turning to God (1 Thess. 1:9). They are like opposite sides of the same coin. That is why both are linked to conversion (Mark 1:15; Acts 3:19-21).

Note that the works John demanded to see were “fruit” of repentance. But repentance itself is no more a “work” than faith is.

Matthew 3:9 "And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to [our] father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham."

John was telling these people not to expect to be saved, just because they had Abraham as an ancestor in the flesh. As we will read in Paul's writings later on, not the physical ancestors of Abraham will inherit salvation but those who are of the spirit (believers in Christ). Those, who by faith, have been grafted into the family line of Abraham by the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

We are related to Abraham through our faith, just as he was accounted worthy by his faith. We also see a message to these self-righteous people; that God can take from the things they count as unimportant, and make of them a family for Abraham.

Matthew 3:10 "And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire."

In this, John was telling this people, you have had your chance. Preparation had been made. If you are not productive to the kingdom, you will be cut down. Just as we will see in a later lesson where Jesus cursed the fig tree and it withered and died.

Irreversible judgment was imminent.

Verses 11-12: “I indeed baptize ... with water”: John’s baptism in water was not Christian baptism. The death and resurrection of Christ had not yet occurred in order to be depicted by this baptism. John’s baptism was similar to the Old Testament offerings (washings), that symbolized a cleansing of personal repentance on the part of a believer. Notice that Jesus submitted to this baptism to “fulfill all righteousness” (verse 15).

“He shall baptize ... with the Holy Ghost” refers to the spiritual rebirth of the regenerate who shall receive the baptism of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). This experience began at Pentecost (Acts 1), and was repeated upon every new group of converts (Samaritans, Gentiles, John’s disciples), until it became normative for all Christian believers. The immediate context certainly indicates that to be baptized “with fire” is the result of judgment (notice the reference to purging and burning in the next verse).

The threshing “fan” (verse 12), refers to a wooden shovel used for tossing grain into the wind in order to blow away the lighter chaff, leaving the good grain to settle in a pile. The chaff would then be swept up and burned; the “unquenchable fire” refers to the eternal punishment of hell or the lake of fire.

Matthew 3:11 "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and [with] fire:"

Three types of baptism are referred to here:

1. With water from repentance. John's baptism symbolized cleansing;
2. With the Holy Spirit. All believers in Christ are Spirit-baptized (1 Cor. 12:13);
3. With ... fire. Because fire is used throughout this context as a means of judgment (verses 10, 12), this must speak of a baptism of judgment upon the unrepentant.

John was saying, truly my baptism (baptism of repentance), is important, you must repent; but there is a better baptism (baptism of the Spirit), that is the earnest of the Spirit (2 Cor. 1:22). He was saying, when you receive this baptism of the Holy Ghost, it will set you on fire for God.

Matthew 3:12 "Whose fan [is] in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

"Fan" is a winnowing fork, a tool for tossing grain into the wind so that the chaff is blown away.

This Scripture was saying He (Jesus) will stir up the people. He will separate the good (wheat) from the evil. This floor, probably, spiritually meant the whole world. He shall gather all believers together unto Him, and they shall become united in Him (the Bride of Christ).

"He will burn up the chaff" just meant the wicked shall burn eternally.

Verses 13-14: All four Gospels relate this event (John 1:31-34), with unquestioned historical verification. While this section of Matthew's gospel centers on Galilee, Jesus now goes south to the Jordan River "to be baptized" (verse 13). The word baptize (Greek baptizo), means "to dip or immerse in water," indicating the form of baptism.

John "forbade him" (verse 14), for the obvious reason that Jesus needed no repentance of sin, and John felt unworthy of this opportunity. The tense of the Greek verb emphasizes that John tried to hinder him. Thus, this was no casual hesitation on the part of John the Baptist.

Matthew 3:13 "Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him."

In this Scripture above, it seems important to know that Jesus had been living in Galilee, of which the little town of Nazareth was a part. He sought John out specifically to baptize Him, probably to show His association with John.

They were cousins in the flesh, and also John would recognize Him. John would be able to see with his own eyes the One he had been proclaiming.

Matthew 3:14 "But John forbid him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?"

“John forbid him”: John’s baptism symbolized repentance, and John saw this as inappropriate for the One he knew was the spotless Lamb of God (John 1:29).

John felt so humble by this. He knew Jesus was Messiah. John felt his need for the salvation Jesus had to offer.

Matthew 3:15 "And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer [it to be so] now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered him."

Christ was here identifying Himself with sinners. He will ultimately bear their sins; His perfect righteousness will be imputed to them (2 Cor. 5:21). This act of baptism was a necessary part of the righteousness He secured for sinners.

“Suffer it to be so” means allow it to be or let it happen. Jesus sought this outward identification with John’s ministry “to fulfill all righteousness”. By identifying Himself with those He came to redeem, Jesus inaugurated His public ministry as the Messiah. In regard to the Jewish religious observances, such as synagogue worship, attendance at feasts, and payment of the temple tax, Jesus always met the duties of a faithful Jew.

Jesus, in speaking to John, affirmed His authority; and John submitted to the higher authority. Jesus was telling John that the correct thing for everyone to do is to do everything righteous. Don't give anyone the appearance of not fulfilling all righteousness.

The first public event of His ministry is also rich in meaning:

1. It pictured His death and resurrection (Luke 12:50);
2. It therefore prefigured the significance of Christian baptism;
3. It marked His first public identification with those whose sins He would bear (Isaiah 53:11; 1 Peter 3:18);
4. It was a public affirmation of His messiahship by testimony directly from heaven.

Verses 16-17: In the process of His baptism, Jesus “went up ... out of the water,” the prepositions suggesting that He was completely in the water and came up out from it, again indicating immersion. The descending of the “Spirit of God” fulfilled the predicted sign to John in order to indicate the true Messiah (John 1:33; Isaiah 11:2).

The “dove” was a symbol of innocence and purity (10:16), and served as an ideal symbolic representation of the Holy Spirit. The “voice from heaven” is that of the Father (see 17:5; John 12:28), where He speaks at the Transfiguration and just prior to the Crucifixion, giving His verbal approval to the ministry of His “beloved Son”.

There can be no doubt that all three persons of the Trinity are actively involved here as distinct persons of the Godhead. The Father speaks, the Spirit descends, and the Son is baptized.

Matthew 3:16-17 "And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him:" "And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Here all 3 Persons of the Trinity are clearly delineated. The Father's command to hear His Son and the Spirit's vindication and empowerment officially inaugurated Christ's ministry.

So much was told spiritually in these two verses, and yet, you cannot separate the two. We know by the description of the baptism, that He went under the water; or else how could He come straightway out.

The most important thing to me, in this Scripture above, is the agreement of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The three were present at this important event, and not only present, but approving. The Father God spoke of His approval in the Son.

The Scriptures can tell us so much, if we will only take the time to look. The One in God is the Spirit. They are in agreement. There are three totally separate personalities in one accord.

Matthew Chapter 3

1. What is the meaning of the name "John"?
2. What does "the Baptist" mean?
3. Where did John preach?
4. What one word covered his message?
5. Why are preachers still saying "the kingdom of heaven is at hand"?
6. Who prophesied about the voice of one crying in the wilderness?
7. What kind of message did John's clothing and food bring?
8. What was John's only purpose?
9. Even though John was not dressed in finery, did the people come to hear him?
10. When they were baptized in the Jordan, what else did they do?
11. What did John call the Sadducees and the Pharisees?

12. Who were the Pharisees?
13. Who were the Sadducees?
14. What did John say that God could use to raise up descendants to Abraham?
15. How are we, Christians, like Abraham?
16. What will happen to the unproductive?
17. John's baptism was to what?
18. What two things will Jesus baptize with?
19. What did John want the people to know about himself?
20. Who are the wheat?
21. Why did John submit to Jesus?
22. Why was Jesus baptized?
23. What was indicated by the Voice, by Jesus, and by the Dove?
24. The one in God is what?