

## **Matthew's Gospel, chapter 3 Wilderness Preacher**

*[New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

### **Matthew chapter 3**

In our kitchen at home, we have a little card with the 5-word maxim "perfect planning prevents pathetic performance." It is something my wife likes to remind me of from time to time. Often this may be true but sometimes circumstances may conspire to undermine even the best made plans. We are now going to think about Matthew chapter 3 and view the planning that God made in preparation for the revelation of His Son, the Messiah, to the nation of Israel. We will start by looking at the first 12 verses that speak about the preparation that went into the Lord's coming, before thinking about the last 5 verses that speak of the big reveal.

"In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; make His paths straight.'" Now John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. 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. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "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.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the axe 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. 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. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire"" (Matthew 3:vv.1-12).

So great a work as the long awaited coming of the Messiah required the preparation of the people to receive Him. Therefore, God sent John, the cousin of Jesus, to prepare the nation of Israel to receive her king. As the son of a serving priest, we might have thought that John would have been found at the very centre of Jewish religious life in Jerusalem. After all, it was in the Temple that God had made His dwelling when it was first built in the days of Solomon. However, God had other plans for John, and rather than serve as a priest, like his father, John was to serve God as a prophet, preparing the way for the coming of Jesus. So, it was not to Jerusalem and the Temple system that John came, but to the wilderness, calling out the people to something that was new, something that was totally different from what had gone before.

John's message was a simple one – "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Because the kingdom of Heaven is such a key phrase in the Gospel of Matthew, it is worth just spending a little time now thinking about what it means. It is mentioned about 32 times in the Gospel and is a phrase that only Matthew, of all the Gospel writers, uses. In the English language we have various words for what exists 'above' us. We speak about the sky, usually meaning our immediate atmosphere of clouds and air. Then we speak about space, where the stars and planets are. Then we speak about heaven – the eternal dwelling place of God. New Testament Greek, and many other European languages only have the one word for all three. It is the eternal dwelling place of God that Matthew has in mind when he speaks of the kingdom of Heaven, that stands in authority over the kingdoms of all the earth. The kingdom of Heaven is greater than all the empires of this earth – past, present and future. It is the realm where the rule and authority of God is acknowledged and encompasses both professing and true confessing reality. Many of the Pharisees and Sadducees that came to hear John would have viewed themselves as authorities in the kingdom of Heaven. However, they were to find out that despite their outward words there was no inner present reality. The kingdom of Heaven has five forms to it. It was spoken about in the Old Testament, as awaiting the coming of the king. Here in Matthew 3, it was at hand. As Jesus went about His public ministry and offered Himself as the King to the nation of Israel the kingdom was present. At His second coming, the kingdom will be experienced during the millennial reign of the Lord over the earth. Finally, the kingdom will be handed over to God and an everlasting kingdom established.

It is worth just noting that the Church should not be confused with the kingdom of Heaven and is an entirely separate entity, although a part of the kingdom of Heaven. Whereas, the king will reign over the earth, and establish a kingdom upon earth at His second coming, the Church's destiny is heavenly rather than earthbound, and came about due to the rejection of the king, as we will see later in this Gospel.

It is to the millennial aspect of the kingdom that the Spirit makes reference in verse 3 as Matthew quotes from Isaiah 40: vv.3–11. The King was about to be presented to the people and to take up the reigns of government. Had the nation accepted Jesus, His kingdom would have been established there and then, and all the blessing spoken about in the Old Testament prophets, referring to that kingdom would have been ushered in. However, in keeping with the grander plans of God, the King was to be rejected – "we will not have this man to reign over us" – and the gospel was to go out to all the world – Jew and Gentile alike in blessing.

But since the kingdom was at hand, and the characteristics of the kingdom (and of the King Himself), are righteousness, justice, holiness and purity then the people really had to change. Thus the call to repent. A superficial sorrow for being caught out in some sin or other would not be enough. What was required for the spiritual state of the people to be ready for the kingdom was a whole-sale sorrow for sin, accompanied by a turning away from that previous lifestyle of self-pleasing. God is a holy God and will not tolerate a lukewarm religiosity accompanied by some half-hearted emotional commitment. He is a jealous God who wants the people of His kingdom to be whole-hearted in their obedience to Him.

How John must have pricked the consciences of those who came out from Jerusalem, and all Judea to hear him. Dressed in the rough cloth of camel's hair and a leather belt and eating locusts and honey, here was a man who had given up all the norms of our indulgent living all the better to experience the keeping power of His God. He could have guilt tripped his listeners to be more like him, as he had given up so much. Guilt is never the best motive for action. Instead, he lived out the reality of what he believed, and gave an example that others could follow. Perhaps we should, at this point, just ask ourselves a simple question: Who do we think really experienced a close understanding of the presence of God - John or the people? Next, do I want to have a genuine and lasting experience of God? Well, if so, there may be some things, not wrong in and of themselves that we may have to give up, in order to better know the keeping power of God. It was not by accident that John was used to prepare the way for Jesus' coming.

His appearance must have sparked echoes in the minds of those who saw him. His lifestyle mirrored that of Elijah. In his day, Elijah had stood alone for God in a godless generation and God had revealed Himself in power on Carmel's mountain top. History was about to repeat itself! The times in which John was living were similarly spiritually dark, and yet God was about to reveal Himself in a far greater way – not a consuming fire to a faithless generation but in flesh – Emmanuel. His appearance then must have been a powerful reminder to the people as to the days they were living in – both their spiritual state and an expectation of what God was about to do.

For those who accepted the rebuke and the call to repentance, John would baptise them in water. It is important to understand that, when the Bible speaks about Baptism it is not always speaking about the same thing. The spiritual meaning of John's baptism is nowhere explained, although we might think that it spoke of an outward demonstration of the inner reality of their confession of sin. In the New Testament letters, Christian baptism is spoken of, and it's symbolic meaning given – an association with the Lord in His death and resurrection – an outer display of the inner new life that we have in Christ.

Here John also introduces us to two further baptisms. In verse 11 He speaks about the One to come – One so great that he would not be worthy to carry His shoes, the job of the lowest of the low – He, would baptise in the Holy Spirit and in fire. Two different baptisms are in view here, and the fire should not be confused with the tongues of fire that appeared on the day of Pentecost. The baptism in the Holy Spirit does indeed refer to Pentecost and is something that is true of every believer today. Though it happened as a one-off event nearly 2000 years ago now, yet each one of us, on trusting the Lord Jesus as Saviour is baptised by the Lord Jesus, in the Spirit, into His body. How wonderful that there is no shortage of the Spirit. It is like being baptised in the ocean – there is an overwhelming supply. If I was to open my mouth, I would be filled with the oceans water, but it would hardly make a difference to the overall sea level. The New Testament writers encourage us to be open to, and therefore filled with, the Holy Spirit who is given in such abundance that He is more than sufficient for each and every one of us.

The Messiah would also baptise in fire which speaks about judgement, and this will take place immediately prior to the establishment of His kingdom on earth. As John was speaking to such a mixed company – repentant listeners as well as judgemental Pharisees - He could not only speak of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. He must also speak about judgment too. This is illustrated in verse 12, where John uses the common picture of the farmer at his threshing floor following the harvest. He would throw the wheat into the air. The wind would blow the chaff to one side, which would then be gathered up and burned as fuel, whilst the heavier wheat fell into the basket to be stored for future use. If there was insufficient wind, then the farmer might employ a man with a large fan (a winnowing fan) to create the breeze sufficient for the task.

John was no follower of celebrity, interested only in gathering a large crowd to himself, no matter the compromises required. In very straight terms, he condemns the attitudes of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They were interested only in their own position within the nation and maintaining the status quo. Their self-importance and self-seeking left them stone cold to the need for genuine repentance. They honestly did not see that this applied to them. Perhaps from his time in the wilderness, John had seen the desert fires so common to the tinder dry, arid Judean wilderness. Had he witnessed the vipers' nest, destroyed by the encroaching flames, and witnessed the serpents slithering to safety? Such were those who rejected John's ministry and would later reject the King.

The Pharisees and Sadducees should have repented and shown the measure of that repentance in changed actions – fruits worthy of repentance. Like James in his letter, he recognised that actions and attitudes, works and words go together. It is no use claiming that we believe if our actions and therefore the fruit of our lives do not confirm this. Faith must always be an individual thing. John's listeners could not claim that because of their national heritage, because they were children of Abraham that all would be well. God was well able to raise up for Himself a host of

those who would truly worship Him, the hardness of the stones reflecting the hardness of the Pharisees and Sadducees hearts.

How utterly different John was! He knew his worth and his place – he was just the humble forerunner of the coming King. As William MacDonald writes in his commentary on this chapter:

“As to ability, He [Jesus] would be mightier: as to His Person, He would be worthier.” (The Gospel of Matthew, Emmaus Worldwide Publications).

As John would later say, in John 3:30:

“He must increase, but I must decrease.”

Here was a man that God could use and who in turn would know the presence of His God as a living reality, as he was about to experience for himself. Let us then read the rest of the chapter:

“Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. And John tried to prevent Him, saying, “I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?” But Jesus answered and said to him, “Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness.” Then he allowed Him. When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased”” (Matthew 3: vv.13–17).

This event was pivotal to both John and the Lord Jesus. It is clear from the various accounts of Jesus’ baptism and John’s recollections about it, that up to this point John did not recognise Jesus for who He truly was. Undoubtedly, he knew of Him as his cousin. He knew Him to be a morally upright and worthy man from Nazareth, but it was not until Jesus was baptised and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him, and the Father spoke about Him, that John recognised that he was truly in the presence of the Messiah, the Son of God.

John’s hesitancy to baptise Jesus stemmed from the fact that he knew of Jesus’ reputation as a morally upright and godly man. He recognised Jesus as one who did not need to repent to be worthy of the coming King. Rather, in himself, he knew that he needed to repent of his own sins, and so deserved to be baptised in water by Jesus. However, Jesus recognised His own need to go through the act of baptism. He does not dispute John’s assertion that He, Jesus, was the One who should be baptising John, as the greater to the lesser. However, as a righteous Man upon earth, Jesus would identify Himself fully with all those who had taken their place in baptism. He would not give His detractors even the smallest opening to accuse Him of not doing all that was required of a righteous man. So, Jesus would enter the waters of the Jordan to be baptised, taking an obedient place alongside all the righteous in Israel at that time. It goes without saying that in no way at all did Jesus need to repent for His own sins – He had none, being wholly God as well as fully Man.

That this was no ordinary baptism soon became apparent. Two things occurred that marked Jesus out as a truly unique person. Firstly, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God, descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. We can understand that the heavens were opened to Jesus – the King had free access into His own territory. There could be no division or barrier between the King and His realm. Or we can view this as referring to the heavens being opened to John. Being in the presence of the Lord Jesus, the King of the heavenly realm, John was aware now for the first time of the reality of who Jesus was.

Both, too, would have seen the Holy Spirit descending upon the Lord Jesus in some miraculous manifestation of personal indwelling. It was not that the Holy Spirit had not indwelt the Lord Jesus before His baptism. Rather God validated His Son in a very particular way at this time. The Holy Spirit rested upon him, literally was at home upon the perfect Son of God, the King who had come to establish His kingdom. When Noah had sent out the dove from the ark, it had returned, unable to find anywhere to rest, such was the devastated condition of the earth after the flood. The raven, who could feed on carrion and death, however, did find a home. Of no other, before the Lord Jesus, could the Holy Spirit be said to find a settled dwelling place. Certainly, the Spirit had come upon men and women to empower them for service before now but could also leave them. God had found His Man, at last, and the Spirit had found a home, here upon earth.

The fact that we, as believers in the Lord Jesus are similarly indwelt by the Holy Spirit can only be as a result of the new nature that He gives us upon salvation. This new nature cannot sin. We are given His righteousness and thus provide a suitable place for the Holy Spirit to rest. This wonderful blessing should really make us challenge ourselves as to ensuring practically speaking that we keep ourselves pure, and unspotted from the world. We ought not to sin as frequently as we do, without much concern.

As well as the visible anointing of the Lord Jesus by the Holy Spirit, the Father gave His personal testimony as to Jesus' worth. Three times during the Lord's life, the Father spoke to commend His well-beloved Son – see also Matthew 17: v.5 and John 12: v.28. These statements bring together what had been spoken of in the Psalms and the Prophets concerning the Messiah – see Psalm 2: v.7 and Isaiah 42: v.1. This was not some sloppy sentimental assessment of a loving Father concerning His Son. Rather it was a glorious commendation of the One and only Son who would perfectly fulfil all that God had promised, from before the foundation of the world. It is fitting for us to take note of how the Father feels about His Son and to share this assessment. We will not go far wrong when we take the plain statements of Scripture concerning Him, and use these to describe our own attitudes about Him.

The King had come! As we progress through Matthew's Gospel we will see the actions of the King – His manifesto, His culture and His purposes. He will reign but His time had not yet come. First, there was the matter of sin to be dealt with. Obedience to His Father would lead Him down a path that few in the crowd that day could ever have expected.

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