

The Preaching of John the Baptist

Matthew skips Jesus' childhood and fast forwards to the beginning of His adult ministry. Jesus would be about 33 years old (6/5^{BC} -28^{AD} – Edwards, 109; or 29^{AD}, Hohner, 44) and His ministry would last 3-4 years (to 32-33^{AD}).

“Although the four canonical gospels begin very differently from one another, it's remarkable that all four include some account of the ministry of John the Baptist before their descriptions of Jesus' ministry. The four evangelists rightly perceived that John's role as forerunner has been predicted by Scripture, and therefore they could scarcely leave him out. Indeed, including him helps to authenticate Jesus; for if Scripture says Messiah must have a forerunner, any messianic claimant must be able to say who his forerunner is” (Carson, *God with Us*, 21). After 400 years of silence, God was again speaking to His people through a prophet.

**3:1 Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying,
3:2 “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”**

“John” or “Johanan” (Ἰωάννης meaning “God graciously gave” – Broadus, 32) was a popular name. About four or five “Johns” appear in the NT alone (listed by Broadus, 32). John, in Matthew 3:1, was designated as “the Baptist,” (ὁ βαπτιστής) because baptism was such a prominent part of his ministry (Carson, 99).

John the Baptist's primary ministry was **preaching** which began **in the wilderness in Judea** (Matt. 3:1) around the district of the Jordan River (Matt. 3:5; Lk. 3:3). This was the land area in the lower Jordan valley just northwest of the Dead Sea. It was hot and arid, but not unpopulated (Carson, 99). The wilderness was commonly used for pasture land and sometimes had watchtowers and cities (Broadus, 33).

John's preaching had primarily two elements: (1) repentance and (2) the proclamation of the nearness of the kingdom.

“**Repentance**” signifies a change of thought and so, a change of opinion and purpose. At times, the prophets also called people to a proper outward change as well. Inward change naturally leads to an outward change of conduct. In the Greek world, the term did not necessarily involve grief; the word was sometimes simply used of a change of judgment or opinion, where there is no occasion for regret (Broadus, 33-34). However, when repentance is tied to the recognition of personal sin, grief also accompanies it. Thus, Carson says, it is “a radical transformation of the entire person, a fundamental turnaround involving mind and action and including overtones of grief which results in ‘fruit keeping with repentance’” (cf. Matt. 3:8 – Carson, 99). A Jewish scholar once said, “Repentance is that the sinner forsakes his sin, puts it out of his thoughts, and fully resolves in his mind that he will never do it again” (MacArthur, 65).

Repentance was the way that John the Baptist “prepared the way of the Lord.” Men and women must turn from their sins and get ready for the Messiah, for when He comes, He will bring either condemnation or blessing; He will baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11).

In short, the need for repentance is because **the kingdom of heaven is near**.

The primary meaning of “kingdom” in the OT is a reign, or dominion, not a territory.¹ However, it must be stressed that John the Baptist, Jesus, and the disciples were all preaching about the kingdom prophesied in the OT with its spiritual, economic, and political aspects, not simply a spiritual kingdom as some believe. The expression “would call to mind for many Jews the numerous Old Testament promises of future blessing, promises sometimes couched in kingdom categories, and sometimes in other terms. There were promises to David’s heir, promises of blessing and judgment on the Day of the Lord, promises of a new heaven and new earth, of a regathered Israel and a new and transforming covenant (2 Sam. 7:13, 14; Isa.1:24-28; 9:6, 7; 11:1-10; 64-66; Jer. 23:5, 6; 31:31-34; Eze. 37:24; Dan. 2:44; 7:13, 14; Zeph. 3:14-20)” (Carson, *God with Us*, 22). In addition, there was “a rising expectation of a divine visitation that would establish justice, crush opposition and renew the very universe” (Carson, 99-100). At the time of Christ, virtually all the attention was given to the destruction of Rome. This is why the disciples could not conceive of how Jesus could suffer and die (Edwards, 110).

John the Baptist proclaimed that the Kingdom of God was at hand (imminent); however, both Judaism and Christ viewed the coming kingdom as a series of events taking place over an extended period of time. “The kingdom of God has come and is coming, and the people of God live between the ages, feeling the tension between the already and not yet. In the Messiah the kingdom has arrived, yet the events have only been inaugurated, and the final stage is in the future” (Edwards, 111).

3:3 For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said,

**“The voice of one crying in the wilderness,
‘Make ready the way of the Lord,
Make His paths straight!’”**

The mission of John the Baptist is related to the prophetic role he fulfills.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all quote from Isaiah 40. Isaiah 40:3-5 reads:

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert, a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth; the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

In the context of Isaiah, the promise is to the exiles in Babylonian captivity. It is a picture of hope. Though they are a sinful ruined people, exiled for their sin in a foreign land, God has not forgotten them, nor has their sinfulness separated them from God forever. They will experience the coming of God. Though they cannot save themselves, God will break into human history and appear to them and save them. The one thing that they can do is prepare the road for their coming king; the preparation is expressed in the metaphors of leveling mountains and valleys, not just filling potholes and knocking down bumps in the road. They were to make the road smooth and straight for the coming of God in all His glory.

Thus, John is compared to an “oriental courier who preceded his monarch to proclaim the king’s coming and the need of the citizens to prepare the roads for his arrival. John’s preparation, however, was in matters pertaining to moral behavior and outlook. To receive the Kingdom promised them by the Old

Testament prophets, Israel's people needed to repent. John's baptism then identified the remnant that had achieved such moral preparation" (Thomas, Gundry, *A Harmony of the Gospels*, 33, n. "v").

It is significant that in Isaiah the way is being made straight for the LORD (Yahweh). In the gospels, the way is being made straight for Jesus. This sort of identification of Yahweh with Jesus is common in the NT (cf. Exo. 13:21 & I Cor. 10:4; Isa. 6:1 & Jn. 12:41; Ps. 68:18 & Eph. 4:8; Ps. 102:25-27 & Heb. 1:10-12). Though Jesus is only implicitly spoken of as God in these verses, John the Baptist was clearly announcing the great age in which God would dwell among men. The one who would come to save His people is Immanuel – God with us. They would see the glory of God in Christ. As John said, "we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth (Jn. 1:14)."²

3:4 Now John himself had a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.

John's apparel is also mentioned. He wore **a garment of camel's hair** (a coarse material made by weaving camel's hair, not a camel skin) and a leather belt around his waist. His diet consisted of locusts and wild honey (Matt. 3:4; Mk. 1:6). The clothes of John were worn by the poor but most likely mentioned to establish links with Elijah (2 Ki. 1:8 [Elijah was called "a hairy man," literally, "a possessor of hair" which probably refers to his clothing, not his person – Broadus, 38], cf. Mal. 4:5; Lk. 1:17; Matt. 11:14). In fact, this type of clothing was so typical of prophets that in Zechariah's day some men who were false prophets dressed like this to deceive people (Zech. 13:4). "Malachi had promised Elijah's return in the end time (Mal 4:5-6), a promise that subsequent Jewish tradition developed (for example, Sirach 48:10; compare 4 Ezra 6:26; t. `Eduyyot 3:4). Although Matthew did not regard John as Elijah literally (17:3; compare Lk 1:17), he believed that John had fulfilled the prophecy of Elijah's mission (Mt 11:14-15; 17:11-13)" (IVP Commentary).

Locusts are large grasshoppers which were allowed to be eaten by Mosaic law (Lev. 11:22). They were boiled, stewed, roasted, eaten fresh, or dried and salted. **Wild honey** is just that, the honey of wild bees found among crevices in rocks, trees, or the like. Both suggest the diet of a man used to rough, wilderness living. This too drew an association with prophets (Matt. 3:1; 11:8-9). Both John's words and his attire spoke to the people.

3:5 Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan; 3:6 and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins.

John's preaching aroused a great excitement among all the people. All of Judea and those in Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized and confessing their sins (Matt. 3:5-6; Mk. 1:4-5). "All", of course, is a hyperbole, meaning that a very great many people went out to listen to Him. Confession of sin was commanded in the law as everyone's responsibility when a wrong was done.

The word translated as "baptize" means simply to immerse. This explains John's need to be by the Jordan River: "**they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River**".

Baptism was not an unknown rite. For instance, some Jewish leaders baptized Gentile converts to Judaism; and some monastic Jewish sects practiced daily self-baptism as a rite of cleansing. But John connected baptism with repentance and the anticipation of the kingdom. So central a feature was this in John's ministry that it earned him the nickname of "John the Baptizer", which we now abbreviate to "John the Baptist" (Carson, *God with Us*, 24).

Verse 6 says they were baptized **“as they confessed their sins”**. This circumstantial participle (ἐξομολογούμενοι) means that confession of sin preceded baptism. The mention of repentance in Matthew 3:11 (**I baptize . . . for repentance**) shows the same order. Luke says John was proclaiming “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Lk. 3:3; in Greek “for” indicates that forgiveness resulted from repentance, not baptism- βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν). John’s baptism demonstrated that a change of mind regarding sin had taken place. Ezekiel 33:18-19 says, “When the righteous turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, he shall die because of it. But when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is lawful and right, he shall live because of it.” It showed that they were children of the kingdom (Edwards, 113).

John was treating Jewish people as if they were Gentiles, calling them to turn to God on the same terms they believed God demanded of Gentiles. As F. F. Bruce puts it, “If John’s baptism was an extension of proselyte baptism to the chosen people, then his baptism, like his preaching, meant that even the descendants of Abraham must . . . enter . . . by repentance and baptism just as Gentiles had to do” (61) (IVP).

John’s baptism, of course, is not the same as Christian baptism. Christian baptism is identification with the triune God. It pictures cleansing from sin due to our union with Christ and His death. It is a sign of entering the New Covenant which did not come into existence until Jesus had died. For this reason, those who were baptized with John’s baptism needed to be baptized again when they came to faith in Christ (Acts 19:1ff.).

3:7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

3:8 Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance;

3:9 and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham.

3:10 The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

[for notes on Pharisees and Sadducees see MacArthur, 60-63; Edwards 113]

Though John was baptizing people as a sign of repentance, not all who came to be baptized were repentant. “The viper is the symbol of wickedness, of envenomed malice - a symbol drawn from the venom of the serpent. It is not quite certain in which of these senses the phrase is used in this place. Probably it is used to denote their malignancy and wickedness” (Barnes). John saw the religious leaders as a **“brood of vipers”**; that is the offspring of poisonous snakes, spreading their own poison like the serpent in the garden.

The question, **“who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”** should probably be seen as sarcasm, having the sense of “Who suggested to you that you could escape the coming wrath?”

The *coming* wrath (also called the Day of the Lord) is the time of judgment preceding Christ’s second coming. It is the prelude to Messiah’s reign (Isa. 3:16-24; 13:9-11; Jer. 30:7; Ezek. 38-39; Amos 5:18-19; Zech. 1:14-18; cf. Matt. 24:21; 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9; Rev. 6:16-17). In OT prophetic thought the coming of

Messiah to save and to judge were seen as one event. John didn't anticipate Messiah bringing salvation now and wrath at a later date.

Baptism alone was insufficient, and repentance must be more than lip service. If John's hearers really wanted to escape the coming wrath, they needed to show the appropriate fruit (cf. Acts 26:20). True **repentance bears fruit** which can be seen by others. A right heart shows itself in proper behavior toward God and man. Examples of the fruit that John had in mind are listed in the parallel passage in Luke 3:11-14:

"The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same. Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely-- be content with your pay." (Luke 3:11-14)

Thus, the fruit of repentance is seen in acts of giving, honesty and justice. After Jonah preached to Nineveh "God saw their works that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it." (Jonah 3:10). Nineveh brought forth fruit in keeping with repentance. However, as we will see in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 "fruit" is not just good works, but good character. Jesus said, "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20). The Pharisees had external righteousness; those who enter the kingdom of heaven need internal righteousness as well.

[MacArthur has a lengthy discussion on repentance and fruit, 64-67]

A great hindrance to true repentance was that the Jews assumed that regardless of their spiritual condition they would enter the kingdom of God since they were descendants of Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel. They reasoned that if they were a chosen nation, then the merits of their ancestors were enough to get by. In one Jewish writing (the Midrash) one Rabbi says, "In the age to come Abraham sits beside the gates of Gehenna and suffers no circumcised Israelite to go down" (Broadus, 47). Yet, John was quick to correct their thinking (3:9).

The coming messianic age would be so discriminating that any tree that would not bear fruit would be hacked down and burned. This view of the future was little appreciated by those who felt that just because they were Jews they would be all right, or that the coming of the Messiah would mean a great political transformation of Israel, freedom from the Roman overlords, and a restoration of Israel's earthly fortunes without any regard for the holiness of Messiah's people. But this Messiah, Matthew insisted, came to save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21), not just from the Romans (Carson, God with Us, 24).

Physical descent meant nothing, for God could change rocks into Abraham's descendants if He wanted to, just as He could cause them to praise His Son (Lk. 19:40). By way of an illustration he demonstrates their destiny if true repentance cannot be found (3:10). Though Israel was called the vineyard of God (Isa. 5:1-7), any tree (any physical descendant) that didn't produce fruit (good works) would be cut down, (judged by God) regardless of their roots (ancestry), and thrown into the fire. It was a normal procedure for trees that did not bear fruit to be cut down to make room for trees that would. "Biblical

tradition had already applied the image of a tree being cut down (Eze.31:12-18; Dan 4:23) or burned (Jer. 11:16) to the judgment of a nation” (IVP). The criterion for avoiding judgment is fruitfulness. In John 15:6 Jesus said that any branch that does not bear fruit is cut off and thrown into the fire and burned. This was also God’s normal procedure throughout Israel’s history. God repeatedly judged the unbelieving in the nation, but saved a remnant (Ro. 11:1-5). These hypocritical leaders were no exception.

Though the tree has not yet been cut down, the time is short, for the axe is already at its roots (for the idiom see Isa. 10:33-34; Jer. 46:22). Not only is the coming wrath near, but God is already beginning to discriminate between the people of Israel (as indicated by the present tenses “is cut” and “is cast” – Broadus, 48). Every person is included. Judgment and the kingdom come hand in hand. To preach one is to preach the other.

3:11 “As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

3:12 His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

The Messiah was the key figure in the coming of the kingdom. The Jews referred to Messiah as “the coming one” (Matt. 11:3) and the Messianic age as the “coming age” (Heb. 6:5). When John was preaching that the Kingdom of heaven was at hand, he was not speaking about a generalized prediction about some future kingdom, but he was speaking as the immediate forerunner of someone coming after him whose sandals he was not fit to remove.

In Luke 3:15-16 it says, “Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, John answered and said to them all, “As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I. . . .” In other words, the explanation of the person and work of Christ in Matthew 3:11 is John’s response to those who wondered if he was the Christ. He was not; Christ is far greater than he.

The greatness of Christ over John is now revealed. In Jesus’ day teachers were not paid but were “reimbursed” by their disciples through acts of service. It was thought that a disciple should do everything for his master that a slave should do, except untie and carry his sandals (Morris, 107). Such a task was so menial and degrading, that even Jewish slaves weren’t asked to stoop so low (though gentile slaves had no such restriction, Marshall, 146). However, John recognized that in comparison to Messiah he wasn’t even worthy to be Jesus’ slave.

The baptism of John was of great importance, but it was only a baptism into water. He who would come after Him would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.

The baptism in the Holy Spirit has caused much confusion and disunity within the church. This is clearly not water baptism for it is contrasted to John’s baptism in water. Some see baptism in the Holy Spirit as a “second blessing” coming only to believers who earnestly seek it after salvation. In their eyes, this is the source of power to live the Christian life, and is evidenced by speaking in tongues. But the Bible teaches no such doctrine. Nowhere in the Bible is anyone commanded to seek the baptism in the Holy Spirit, nor is there a single example of anyone doing such a thing. This is a metaphor that depicts the

outpouring of the Holy Spirit promised in the New Covenant (cf. Acts 2:14; Joel 2:28; Ezek. 36:25-26; 39:29). Christ alone has the authority to give the Holy Spirit, and does so to every believer at salvation (1 Cor. 12:13). [see more on the Baptism in the Holy Spirit in my footnotes on Acts 1:1-11]

John also said that Jesus would baptize with fire. More and more commentators are seeing this as a hendiadys (more than one word used to express a single idea; Edwards, 116). Carson sees fire as a symbol of purity as in Isaiah 1:25, Zachariah 13:9, and Malachi 3:2.3. Yet he then says, "But that same figure would affect a separation among human beings; some would be gathered like good grain, and some, like chaff, would be destroyed (see Matt, 13:20). Messiah's coming, in other words, would bring both blessing and judgment, Holy Spirit purity and unequivocal condemnation" (Carson, *God with Us*, 23). As the Reformation Study Bible says, "The fire of the Spirit renews the people of God and consumes the wicked as chaff (Is. 4:4; Zech. 13:9; Mal. 3:2, 3; 4:1)."

However, it seems better in this context to take "fire" as a reference to judgment. The Messiah is both Savior and Judge. John had already spoken of "the wrath to come" in Matthew 3:7 (Isa. 34:8-10; 66:24; Jer. 7:20), and the picture of *separation* (in this case the separation of the wheat and the chaff) is a common way to describe the discrimination between the believing and unbelieving when Christ returns (cf. the wheat and the tares in Matt. 13:24-30, 37-43; the good fish and bad fish in Matt. 13:47-50; the sheep and the goats in Matt. 25:31-34, 46). "Earlier biblical writers had used these images to symbolize judgment and the end time (as in Psa. 1:4; Isa. 17:13; Hos. 13:3; Joel 3:13)" (IVP).

Chaff consists of bits of straw and husk which needed to be removed before the wheat could be stored or eaten. To remove the chaff the wheat was pounded on the threshing floor or wood was drawn over it with oxen (see MacArthur, 72 for details). The mixture of wheat and chaff was then thrown into the air with a winnowing fork. The wheat grains which were heavier fell to the floor and the chaff was blown away by the wind. The wheat was then gathered and placed into barns and the chaff burned with fire. None will escape Christ's scrutiny for He will "thoroughly clear" the threshing floor.

"Judgment is coming, but the coming judge John announces is superhuman in rank (3:11-12). Only God could pour out the gift of the Spirit (Is 44:3; 59:21; Ezek 36:27; 37:14; 39:29; Joel 2:29; Zech 12:10), and no mere mortal would baptize in fire" (IVP). John's Successor would divide men; salvation and the Holy Spirit would be the gift to those who believe, but judgment would be executed upon those who do not.

ENDNOTE 1: Except in 12:28, 19:24, 21:31, and 43, Matthew always uses "kingdom of heaven" while other writers seem to prefer "kingdom of God." Matthew is not trying to limit God's reign to heaven, for the goal in the Bible is that God will reign among men on the earth.

Several suggestions have been made:

- Matthew might have used "kingdom of heaven" as a means of circumventing the word "God," which would be offensive to the Jews who held the name holy and used it only with extreme caution.
- He may have wanted to speak ambiguously, leaving room for the kingdom where God rules and a kingship belonging to Jesus (Matt. 16:28; 25:31, 34, 40; 27:42; and possibly 5:35).

- He may have simply wanted to emphasize the extent of God's authority as reaching well beyond the earth.

What is clear is that when John the Baptist was "preparing the way of the Lord" he was more specifically preparing it for the way of Jesus; John was Jesus' forerunner.

ENDNOTE 2: It's interesting to observe the numerous references to the exodus from Egypt and the Babylonian exile and exodus. This suggests that we should draw a connection between those events and the deliverance and restoration in Christ.

In the Book of Isaiah, Israel's deliverance and restoration to the land is portrayed as a second Exodus (Isa. 40:3; 43:16-21; 44:26-27; 48:21; 49:9-12; 51:9-11; 52:10-12).

- Matthew 1 mentions the Babylonian exile as a reference point in Jesus' genealogy (1:11,12).
- "When Matthew applied Isaiah 7:14 to the birth of the God-man Jesus, he was following the lead of Isaiah himself, who, suggested a typological connection between the child Immanuel and becoming ideal Davidic ruler" (Chisholm, A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament, 316).
- Ramah was the place the Jews were gathered before taken into Babylonian exile. "In 2:17-18 Matthew sees Herod's slaughter of the children of Bethlehem as a fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:15, which describes the mothers of Ramah (not Bethlehem) weeping as their children are carried away into exile. Once again, Matthew's use of the Old Testament is based on the observation of a pattern or analogy between distinct historical events or persons" (Chisholm, 316).
- The return of Jesus from Egypt to Israel is spoken of in terms of Israel's exodus from Egypt when God said, "Out of Egypt I called My Son." Jesus fulfills the first exodus. "The Hosea passage can in no way be interpreted in its context as prophetic or messianic, but it can legitimately provide a pattern for subsequent salvation history. Jesus came as a new or ideal Israel whose experience of exile and return follow the pattern of the ancient nation's early history" (Chisholm, 316).
- John's appearance in the desert reminds us of Moses leading the Jews out of Egypt (Blomberg, 11).
- In Matthew 3, John announces the coming of Jesus in terms of the promise made to the Jews in Babylonian exile. Jesus fulfills the second exodus.