

Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand (Matt. 3:1–12)

By Jacob D. Gerber

Matthew has concluded the infancy narratives of Jesus; however, he is only beginning to tell us about the kingship of Jesus. Jumping forward several years, Matthew brings us directly onto the scene where John the Baptist is preaching a message of repentance, in view of the coming kingdom of heaven. Here, we are seeing the first glimpses of the message that will dominate this Gospel. Especially, John the Baptist clarifies the impact and importance of Jesus' coming. We must make all due preparations for his coming, especially by repenting from our sins. The consequences for disobeying and ignoring this summons are the "wrath to come" (v. 7) and the "unquenchable fire" (v. 12). John the Baptist's message still rings true today. Between the first coming of the King, and his eventual second coming, *King Jesus calls us to prepare for his coming kingdom.*

The Ministry of Repentance (Matt. 3:1–6)

Abruptly, Matthew introduces us to John the Baptist: "In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (v. 1–2). While Matthew will give more details in subsequent verses about the man and his manner, he begins by introducing us to his mission and message. First, Matthew tells us that John is "the Baptist" (v. 1a)—not a reference to the modern tradition who call themselves "Baptists," but simply a statement about one of the primary means of ministry for John: baptism. Second, Matthew tells us that John "came preaching in the wilderness of Judea" (v. 1b). As a preacher, John's mission is to proclaim the message of God, according to the word of God (cf. Luke 3:3).¹ Third, Matthew tells us that John came preaching "in the wilderness of Judea" (v. 1c). In part, the wilderness is a reminder of Israel's wilderness wanderings for forty years under Moses, due to their hard-hearted unbelief and rebellion, when they refused to enter into the promised land (Num. 14).² Then, the Prophets spoke much of the hope for God's people in the midst of the "wilderness," which was symbolic the sin, suffering, and exile of Israel—out of which God promised to bring salvation (e.g., Isa. 41:18–19; 43:19–21; 44:3–4; Jer. 2:2–3; Ezek. 20:35–38; Hos. 2:14–15).³

Fourth, Matthew tells us the twofold message of John's preaching: repentance, and the kingdom of heaven. For the former topic, Craig Blomberg writes, "*Repentance* in Greek traditionally implied a change of mind or attitude, but under Old Testament influence it took on the sense of a change of action as well."⁴ That is, repentance is a change of mind, from a change of heart, toward a change of

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 91.

² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 92.

³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 100.

⁴ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 73.

life. Repentance is the means to a greater end: the “kingdom of heaven.” This latter topic Matthew’s synonymous way of describing what other Gospel-writers primarily refer to as the “kingdom of God,” and it refers not to any particular place where God is king (a “realm”), but over those who obey God as their sovereign (a “rule”): “The kingdom is something that happens rather than something that exists.”⁵ Ever since our first parents fell into sin in the garden of Eden, God no longer rules over his people by bare command, in a covenant of works. Rather, God relates to us by a covenant of grace. In the covenant of grace, God remains the almighty, sovereign king over his people; however, he calls them into his kingdom by the promise of the remission of sins, adoption as God’s own children, and into righteousness and holiness that he freely gives us by faith—which is why such a kingdom can only be entered by *repentance*.⁶ The message that John proclaims here is the same message that Jesus will take up when he begins his own public ministry (Matt. 4:17).

Although Matthew introduces John the Baptist abruptly, he explains that John’s ministry was not unexpected, but rather the fulfillment of prophecy: “For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight”’” (v. 3). Matthew here cites Isaiah 40:3. Calvin well explains the original audience of this message: “The prophet undoubtedly addresses Cyrus and the Persians, whose agency the Lord employed in this matter. The meaning is: by his wonderful power, God will open a way to his people through impassable forests, through broken rocks, through a sandy desert; for he will have at hand the ministers of his grace, to remove all hinderances out of the way. But that was a shadowy anticipation of redemption.”⁷ The command to prepare the Lord’s way, and to make his paths straight, draws on ancient imagery of preparations for the visit of a king: “In antiquity when it was known that the sovereign was coming, every effort would be made to ensure that the road was a smooth as it could be. The great one must be able to travel easily and quickly.”⁸ The same kind of thing happens to this day. When the President of the United States visited Omaha in 2016, officials shut down I-80 at rush hour to make sure that he could travel through the city easily and quickly. Just as the Lord powerfully and surprisingly used Cyrus and the Persians to bring about the return of Israel from their Babylonian exile, so the Lord will make all crooked paths straight to bring his kingdom into the world through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

After we have the summary of John’s mission and message, Matthew pulls back to give us more information about the man and his message: “Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey” (v. 4). Matthew depicts John in a similar description to Elijah, one of the great prophets of the Old Testament, who also “wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist” (2 Kgs. 1:8).⁹ Such clothing marked John off as poor, wild, and stern, a characterization that Jesus gets at another way when he ironically asks whether the people went out to John in the wilderness to see a reed shaken by the wind, or a man dressed in soft clothing (Matt. 11:8).¹⁰ John apparently collected wild honey wherever he could find

⁵ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 53.

⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:178–79.

⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:182.

⁸ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 54.

⁹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 75.

¹⁰ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 199.

it, and he ate the plentiful and nutritious locusts (“the only winged insects not to be treated as unclean”; Lev. 11:20–23)¹¹ as a staple of his diet.

Then, after this brief description of John, Matthew returns to describing John’s ministry: “Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (v. 5–6). Scholars debate what model John followed, if any, for the baptism he practiced. Some think that the practice of Jewish proselyte baptism (the baptism of Gentiles who converted to Judaism) may be the background of John’s ministry; however, as John Nolland writes, “It is unlikely that Jewish proselyte baptism, which is frequently compared with John’s baptism, had emerged as a Jewish practice this early; even when it did emerge, it was self-baptism in the presence of witnesses, and not baptism by another.”¹² If this forms any part of the background, however, it is notable that these were not Gentiles being baptized, but Jews.¹³ The point of John’s baptism, then, seems less about conversion, and more about cleansing. If so, then the numerous Old Testament baptisms for ritual purification may be more in view (e.g., Ex. 29:4; 30:20; Lev. 8:6; Ezek. 16:4). It is notable that the Israelites are baptized not for ceremonial uncleanness, but through “confessing their sins.”

The Fruit of Repentance (Matt. 3:7–10)

Out of the crowd of people coming to him for baptism, John singles out the religious leaders for rebuke: “But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance’” (v. 7–8). The Pharisees were a religious group whose name means “separated.”¹⁴ While common portrayals of the Pharisees portray them as legalistic by being overly strict about the law, the truth is that the Pharisees piled up their own traditions and rules as a way of trying to *relax* the infinitely high demands of the law. J. Gresham Machen makes this point well:

The legalism of the Pharisees, with its regulation of the minute details of life, was not really making the Law too hard to keep; it was really making it too easy. Jesus said to His disciples, “Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven.” The truth is, it is easier to cleanse the outside of the cup than it is to cleanse the heart. If the Pharisees had recognized that the Law demands not only the observance of external rules but also and primarily mercy and justice and love for God and men, they would not have been so readily satisfied with the measure of their obedience, and the Law would then have fulfilled its great function of being a schoolmaster to bring them to Christ. A low view of law leads to legalism in religion; a high

¹¹ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 139.

¹² Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 141.

¹³ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 201.

¹⁴ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 56.

view of law makes a man a seeker after grace.¹⁵

On John’s condemnation of the Pharisees and Sadducees, Calvin observes that hypocrites “deceive themselves and others by the outward mask of holiness. While God thunders, on all sides, against the whole world, they construct a refuge for themselves in their own deceitful fancy; for they are convinced that they have nothing to do with the judgment of God.”¹⁶

When John calls the Pharisees a “brood of vipers,” he is saying that they are the offspring of serpents, “serpents sprung from serpents.”¹⁷ This is a reference back all the way to the first promise of the gospel in the Bible, when God said to the serpent (Satan): “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15). That is, God declares that there will be two lineages of offspring: those descended from the woman, by promise, and those descended from the serpent, according to the (sinful) flesh. This theme is traced out through the Bible, all the way into the New Testament (cf. John 8:44; 1 John 3:10). This is part of the reason that John immediately cuts off the objection of the Pharisees and Sadducees that they have Abraham for a father (v. 9). This last old covenant prophet is declaring to Israel’s religious leaders that not all those descended from Israel truly belong to Israel (Rom. 9:6).

The proof of true repentance—and, therefore, true inclusion in Israel—would be for the Pharisees and Sadducees to bear fruit in keeping with repentance, “for *repentance* is an inward matter, which has its seat in the heart and soul, but afterwards yields its fruits in a change of life.”¹⁸ It is not that good works are the prerequisite to earn salvation, but that good works are the fruit that flow out of the life of someone who has already received salvation.¹⁹ True inclusion is not based on biological descent from Abraham, because, as John points out, “God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham” (v. 9). Instead, John gives a stern and clear warning: “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (v. 10). Old Testament authors proclaimed the same message: God had created Israel to be a tree bearing much good fruit, and if Israel did not bear good fruit, God would cut off the nation (e.g., Ps. 1:3; Isa. 5:1–7; Jer. 24; Ezek. 15; 17).

The Spirit of Repentance (Matt. 3:11–12)

In the last section of this passage, John compares and contrasts his own ministry with the ministry of Jesus: “I baptize you with water for 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” (v. 11). John is *distinguishing* his baptism from the baptism of Jesus, but he is not *separating* the two. The baptism of John and the baptism of Jesus are integrally connected, so that John’s baptism is the outward, physical sign (water applied to the body) of the inward, spiritual reality that

¹⁵ J. Gresham Machen, *The Origin of Paul’s Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 179.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:186.

¹⁷ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 57–58.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:189–90.

¹⁹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 58; *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 16.2.

only the one-coming-after-John would bring. John does not denigrate the value of what he is doing, but only insisting on its provisional status as a sign and a seal. Apart from the spiritual baptism of Christ, the baptism of water can accomplish nothing. John Calvin draws this lesson into the ongoing practice of baptism in the church today:

We must therefore hold by what I have already said, that John merely distinguishes, in this passage, between himself and the other ministers of baptism, on the one hand, and the power of Christ, on the other, and maintains the superiority of the master over the servants. And hence we deduce the general doctrine, as to what is done in baptism by men, and what is accomplished in it by the Son of God. To men has been committed nothing more than the administration of an outward and visible sign; the reality dwells with Christ alone.²⁰

John says that the one coming after him is much greater, so that John will not be worthy to carry his sandals. While disciples at this time were expected to do almost anything for their rabbis, the one major exception was that rabbis could not ask their disciples to deal with their shoes: “There is a rabbinic saying: ‘Every service which a slave performs for his master shall a disciple do for his teacher except the loosing of his sandal-thong.’ It is a mark of John’s humility that he says he is not worthy of the service that no one but a slave would perform.”²¹

What, then, will this baptism with Holy Spirit and fire be? Jesus explains something of what he means in the next verse: “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (v. 12). Here, the fire in view is clearly a judgment. Those who reject the one coming after John will be subject to the unquenchable fire—the “wrath” (v. 7) of God. Still, we should also remember that on the Day of Pentecost, the disciples of Jesus experienced the baptismal outpouring of the Holy Spirit by the manifestation of tongues of fire resting over them (Acts 1:5; 2:1–4). While some commentators try to understand John as meaning *either* judgment *or* blessing, it is probably better to see the baptism of the Spirit as twofold: blessing for those who believe, and judgment for those who do not believe.²² This would correspond well with the sign of water baptism, since both Paul and Peter note that Christian baptism corresponds to God’s deliverance of his people through the waters that destroy their enemies (1 Cor. 10:2; 1 Pet. 3:20–21). In baptism, God’s people were kept safe from the immersion of judgment that destroyed God’s enemies.

Discussion Questions

1. What mission has God given John the Baptist? What is John’s message? What manner of life does he adopt? What are the characteristics of his ministry? What is the nature of the repentance that John preaches? How does the Old Testament background of wilderness wanderings and Isaiah 40:3 help us to understand John better? What is the “kingdom of heaven”? In what sense is the kingdom

²⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:197–98.

²¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 61.

²² Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 208–09.

of heaven “at hand”? What is the significance of the baptism that John performs?

2. Who were the Pharisees and Sadducees? Why does John call them a “brood of vipers”? How did their legalism lead them to relax the full force of the requirements of the Law? What does John mean when he urges them to “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (v. 8)? Why is the biological descent of the Pharisees from Abraham unimportant in this situation? What warning does John give to the Pharisees and Sadducees?

3. In what sense is John’s baptism different and distinct from Jesus’ baptism? In what sense is the baptism of John connected to the baptism of Jesus? Accordingly, why do we believe that baptism is important today? On the other hand, what do we need to be careful to avoid attributing to water baptism? What warning does John give to those who do not have the baptism of the Spirit that Jesus provides?

4. Are you ready for the coming King? What does John the Baptist teach us about how we should prepare for his coming kingdom? Why is confession of sins, repentance, and purification central to preparing for the King’s coming? What is one area in your life where you have not prepared for the coming of Jesus’ kingdom as you ought? What would a repentance of a change in your mind, from a change in your heart, and toward a change of your life look like in that area?