

## The Ministry of John the Baptist and our Lord's Baptism

### Matthew 3

Matthew 3:1-17 - *"In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, <sup>2</sup> and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" <sup>3</sup> 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."*

*<sup>4</sup> Now John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup> Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him <sup>6</sup> and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.*

*<sup>7</sup> 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? <sup>8</sup> Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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."*

*<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup> And John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?"*

*<sup>15</sup> But Jesus answered and said to him, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he allowed Him.*

*<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."*

### Background Notes

In Matthew 2 we looked at the account of the visit of the wise men, our Lord's escape with Mary and Joseph to Egypt, and their return to Nazareth. Between chapters 2 and 3 of Matthew, about 27 to 29 years of our Lord's life are not revealed.

In Matthew 3 we move on to the beginning of our Lord's public ministry. The only event in our Lord's life during these early years that is recorded in Scripture is the time when He went up to Jerusalem at twelve years of age with Joseph and Mary, and astounded the Jewish teachers in the Temple area with His questions and answers (Luke 2).

Although Scripture doesn't tell us much about the early years of our Lord's life, notice what we read in Matthew 3:16-17: "...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." Our Lord was anointed by the Holy Spirit for His public ministry, and the voice of the Father was heard, saying: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

This statement from God was made **before** the Lord's public ministry began. It was stated **before** any of the Lord's miracles or the discourses or public events. So - as the Father looked over those years when our Lord was a child, a pre-teen, a teenager, and then a young man in His twenties - **God the Father saw nothing but perfection!** Here was the perfect Man! Here was the Son of God! "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Notice, by the way, that the three Persons of the Trinity are clearly brought out in these verses 16-17: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In Matthew 3 we learn that John the Baptist came on the scene as a rugged "Elijah"-type figure, clothed in a garment of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist. He lived in the wilderness of Judea, and ate locusts and wild honey. But don't get the idea that John the Baptist lived as a hermit in a cave out there in the wilderness. No, Orthodox Jews lived in a number of wilderness communities. Known as the Essenes, these Jews wanted to separate themselves from the hypocrisy and corruption of the Temple system in Jerusalem. Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were copied and hidden, was probably a community of Essenes. John the Baptist possibly lived among and was associated with one of those Orthodox Jewish communities.

John the Baptist was the forerunner of the coming Messiah as predicted in the Old Testament prophecies. Isaiah prophesied that John the Baptist would be "the voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight" (v3). John the Baptist's essential message was "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (v2). The kingdom of God, which was predicted in the Old Testament, was at hand. This was the kingdom that the Messiah, who was in the line of David, was to set up here on this earth. The King was about to arrive, so the Kingdom was at hand.

However, we know that when the King, the Lord Jesus, arrived, He was rejected by the nation of Israel. As a result, the earthly Kingdom of our Lord has been postponed until His second coming. In the meantime (as we will see unfolded in our study of the Gospel of Matthew), while the King is in Heaven, the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth includes the true and the false, the "wheat and the tares," the genuine believers and the false professors. All this is clearly seen in the parables of the Kingdom in Matthew 13.

At this point, however, when John the Baptist announced that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand, a genuine offer of the Messianic Kingdom was being made to Israel. Would they receive it - or would they reject it? In order to prepare for the Messiah and His Kingdom, the people needed to repent and be "baptized unto repentance."

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. The baptism of John was a *“baptism unto repentance.”*

The baptism of John was a *“baptism unto repentance.”* This was not - and is not - the same as Christian baptism. Don't mix them up! Christian baptism was not instituted until the end of the Gospel of Matthew, after our Lord's death and resurrection. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for the Jewish people who were willing to repent of their sins, renounce their association with unbelieving Judaism, and prepare for the coming of the Messiah.

The Bible doesn't mention baptism in the Old Testament times. Baptism arose during the Intertestamental period. At that time, baptism was a ceremony for Gentile converts to Judaism. So “John's baptism” was quite radical, because Jews themselves were being called on to be baptized, renouncing their pride, hypocrisy, unbelief and other sins, to prepare for the coming of the Messiah.

John denounced the self-righteous Pharisees and Sadducees who were trying to jump on John's popularity “band wagon” (v7). He called these religious hypocrites a brood of vipers! These people thought that being a descendant of Abraham was enough to get them into the Kingdom of God. They thought that they were God's elite! “I'm so sorry,” said John. “You're not God's elite! God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones!” Verse 9: *“For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.”*

At this point, the logical question would be: “If John's baptism was a baptism unto repentance, then why did the Lord Jesus need to submit to John's baptism? The Lord Jesus did **not** need to undergo John's baptism of **repentance**, as John rightly pointed out (v14). Our Lord was sinless. In verse 15, however, the Lord said that it was the right thing to do at this time. Why? When He was baptized by John, our Lord set the example. He identified Himself with those who were separating themselves from unbelieving Judaism and preparing for the Kingdom of God.

The baptism of John was a baptism unto repentance.

### 2. The baptism of Jesus would be with the Holy Spirit and fire.

John said, *“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”* (v11).

What did John mean when he said that the coming Messiah would baptize *“with the Holy Spirit and fire”*? Is “fire” a reference to the tongues of fire that accompanied the coming of the Holy Spirit at the time of Pentecost? Or is it the fire of judgment? Bible scholars are not in agreement. In view of verse 12, though, it would seem that it is the fire of **judgment**: *“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.”*

The baptism with fire is yet in the future, when the Lord returns. Because the King was rejected and His Kingdom on earth postponed until the second coming, the “baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire” appears to be in two stages that are separated by time. The baptism with the Holy Spirit occurred at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon the Church with power and blessing. The baptism with fire will occur when the Lord returns in judgment.

The baptism of Jesus would be with the Holy Spirit and fire.

## **Practical Application**

**You, too, can have a ministry in a wilderness.**

*“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” (v4-6).*

Who would have ever thought that thousands of people would go out into the Judean wilderness to listen to - and be baptized by – a man like John the Baptist? John the Baptist was unusual - a kind of “social misfit.” He was an ascetic individual. People would not automatically be attracted to John, yet people walked for miles through the harsh wilderness to come to hear him! Why? Because John was faithful, and he was doing what the Lord had called him to do. As a result, God blessed his ministry.

You too, can have “a ministry in a wilderness.” Maybe you feel that you’re a bit of a “social misfit.” People are not automatically attracted to you. They may even ignore you. Maybe you feel like you’re living in a wilderness – “isolated” in your workplace, in your neighborhood, on your campus. You feel that it’s just not the right place to start a ministry. No one would be interested what you have to say, anyway.

But you really want to serve the Lord! So - ask God to lead you. Trust Him. He can do things through you that you have never even dreamed of! You too, can have a ministry in a wilderness!