

The Preaching of John the Baptist
Matthew 3:1-12
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- I. The Person of the Christ (1:1-4:11)
 - A. The Incarnation of Christ (1:1-2:23)
 - 1. The Genealogy of the Christ (1:1-17)
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 - 1. The Preaching of John the Baptist (3:1-12)

Matthew 1:1-17 details to whom Jesus was born, Matthew 1:18-25 details how Jesus would be born, Matthew 2:1-12 details where Jesus would be born, and Matthew 2:13-23 details how Jesus would be spared.

The summary of John's preaching (3:1-2)

There is a thirty year gap between Matthew 2:23 and Matthew 3:1 (cf. Luke 3:23). Matthew moves to demonstrating Jesus' Messiahship through the prophet John.

John's title provided by Matthew was likely how he was referred to by the multitudes listening to him. It characterizes him as one who performs baptism but the focus of this section is on the content of John's preaching that results in baptism.

Baptism was practiced by the Jews from a couple of centuries before John but it was for the practice of initiating converts to Judaism in the practice of proselytism. This Old Testament basis for this practice was likely the ceremonial cleansings (Exodus 19; Leviticus 15; Numbers 19) for the purpose of purification.

John's baptism was different from Jewish baptism for the recipients were not solely Gentiles and it was also different from ceremonial cleansings since it was done to another person, not to one's self. John essentially instituted a new practice.

The preaching of John was not our sense of modern preaching with instructional discourse of exhortation but the proclamation of an event. Preaching (KERYSSO) in the New Testament heralds the good news of the coming kingdom. Matthew summarizes this proclamation as “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Repentance is a change of mind that results in a change of heart and will. It may include emotion but the focus is on true change for the goal of responding positively to God’s revelation. When we truly change the way we think, the result will be seen in our desires and our behavior. Thus John could call men to “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (3:8). The repentance that John spoke of involved an acknowledgment of sin (3:6) as we change our minds about sin. Repentance that turns from sin to God allows us to flee from the wrath of come (3:7).

The reason to repent is because the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Jesus proclaimed the same message (Matthew 4:17). The phrase “at hand” (EGGIZO) is used often in Matthew (4:17; 10:7; 21:1, 34; 26:45-46). It does not mean “to be here” but rather “to draw near.” The kingdom of heaven has drawn near by the arrival of Jesus Christ.

This kingdom of heaven is what was prophesied in the Old Testament. The kingdom in the Scripture refers to the earthly reign of Christ upon the earth. As we continue to see when Old Testament prophecy is fulfilled, it is fulfilled in a literal fashion. People in modern times have increasingly considered the kingdom to be spiritual in heaven, not literal on earth. However, Jesus and John did not explain to their hearers that the kingdom was in any way different from what was spoken of by the prophets, literally on earth.

The prophecy of John preaching (3:3)

This prophecy that Matthew quotes is unique in that it does not open with a statement about fulfillment when he quotes Isaiah 40:3 about a forerunner to the Messiah. Nevertheless, it is presented to the reader as the words of Isaiah made in reference to John the Baptist.

The immediate context of Isaiah 40:3 was comfort for the exiles in Babylon that they would return to the land. This begins a large ending section of Isaiah (chapters 40-66) that speaks of the hope of a complete restoration of Israel in the coming kingdom ruled by the Messiah. We now know in retrospect that this will be fulfilled in the second coming of Christ.

Matthew 3:3 includes the implication of Christ's deity as Isaiah 40:3 speaks of making ready the way for the Lord, and Matthew clearly applies this to Jesus. Hence, Jesus is the Lord that John is referred to as making a way for. The Lord (Yahweh) of Isaiah 40:3 is Christ, not just one representing the Lord. This corresponds to Matthew's prior identification of Jesus as deity by the name of Immanuel, "God with us" in Matthew 1:23. These word choices were foreordained by the Holy Spirit in moving the author to write (2 Peter 1:20-21).

The response of John's preaching (3:4-6)

John was described by Matthew in terms of one who is associated with the poor. The poor ate a diet of insects and wild honey. John was uninterested in the finer things of life, and his message of repentance was supported by his lifestyle. Bedouin desert nomads still will wear camel hair garments in modern times. His message did not drive people to austerity but included sharing and contentment (Luke 3:10-14). His focus was his mission of preparing people to repent when the kingdom of heaven was at hand with the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

The response to John's message was widespread with the statement "Jerusalem was going out to him." John's popularity is supported by the historian Josephus as well. People were willing to travel by foot many miles to hear him.

Those traveling to John for baptism as described were from Jewish areas. These are not proselytes to Judaism for John is calling for repentance and confession from the Jewish people. The description of this movement toward John shows this is beyond simply individuals seeking to respond to God. It was also a movement within Judea. There is a national element of Israel as a whole happening, which provides the nation with the opportunity to prepare itself for their Messiah, Jesus Christ.

As they responded to John's teaching, they were baptized. The support of the view that baptism was done by immersion comes from the location of John's ministry. Matthew includes the detail of the location of the baptisms – "in the Jordan River." This corresponds also to the meaning of baptism, which is literally "to dip."

The recipients were baptized "as they confessed their sins." Thus, the baptism was directly connected to their repentance as testified to by their confession of sins. This turning from sin to God in John's baptism supports the practice of baptism by the church where people believed and were baptized. Baptism did not cause the confession and repentance but it was the outward behavior associated with this change of mind and heart.

The rebuke in John's preaching (3:7-9)

The Pharisees and Sadducees are introduced in Matthew's Gospel before Jesus even begins His public ministry. This prepares the reader for the coming theme of these religious leaders' opposition to Christ.

The Pharisees and Sadducees are described as hypocrites who did not follow their words. "Fruit" is what other people see that reflects a person's spiritual condition and these leaders did not give evidence of repentance in light of the kingdom of heaven being at hand. While they joined with many multitudes to come to John for baptism, their motivation was not repentance from sin. Their actions were solely religious in nature, devoid of inner reality. Their hypocrisy will be described throughout Matthew's work.

More than being self-righteous, John's rebuke included that they were dangerous. Isaiah had likened vipers to the enemies of God (Isaiah 14:29; 30:6). They would not escape the wrath of God.

Beyond their failure to bear the fruit of repentance, they wrongly believed they would participate in the kingdom of heaven because of their Jewish heritage. Much like people today who believe they are Christians because of their family or because they go to church, these leaders considered their privilege as Jews as determinative of their spiritual standing. They felt no need for repentance because they were born into privilege and ascended to leadership of the Jewish nation.

The word for "stones" was a word play on the word "children" in both Aramaic and in Hebrew (depending on which John spoke) as stones and children sound similar. God could make stones to be His children so those with Jewish heritage must not trust in this but in God. Also, this is a hint toward what will come, that if God can make the stones His children, He can also do this for the Gentiles.

The retribution in John's preaching (3:10-12)

The Pharisees and Sadducees were warned by John of coming judgment. The use of the present tense to depict a future event is known as the futuristic present tense that serves to convey the imminence of a coming event. The ax is already laid at the root of the tree. The tree that does not bear the fruit of repentance is cut down and thrown into the fire. This description shows the destructive nature of the coming judgment.

This statement of impending judgment is the precursor to Christ's frequent denunciations of judgment upon these leaders during His public ministry. They had the opportunity to repent at the baptism of John but turned away. They had the opportunity to see the works of Christ and hear the words of Christ but turned away. God has certainly been long-suffering with the people of Israel.

One challenge in this section is how to understand the baptism of Jesus with the Holy Spirit and fire. Since there is no evidence that Jesus ever personally baptized anyone, this should be understood as the baptism of the Holy Spirit as in 1 Corinthians 12:13, where we are placed into the body of Christ. John's statement about Christ's baptism with the Holy Spirit was initiated at the day of Pentecost in Acts 2.

But how does Jesus baptize with fire? The imagery of fire in the Bible is typically one of judgment. Furthermore, the context of this statement is also one of judgment, as clearly seen in verses 10 and verses 12.

However, the grammatical construction of a definite article followed by two nouns joined by a conjunction ("the Holy Spirit and fire") normally depicts the two nouns joined together. Also, the singular occurrence of the verb "will baptize" also supports the view that there is only one baptism in view. In addition, the preposition "in" occurs only once with "Holy Spirit and fire." Thus, there is one baptism, consisting of the Holy Spirit and fire.

The Old Testament text of Malachi 3:1-2 (cf. Mark 1:2-3) that predicted the coming of John the Baptist as a forerunner to Christ also included a reference to fire:

*"Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the Lord of hosts. 2 "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? **For He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap.**"*

This reference to refiner's fire looks to a judgment of purification rather than a judgment of destruction. The baptism of the Holy Spirit certainly brings refining to the life of the recipient.

This understanding is consistent with the judgment of Matthew 3:12. Those who belong to the Lord have been baptized by the Holy Spirit. This refinement is the fruit of repentance that demonstrates that they are the wheat and not the chaff.

The picture of the Lord with a winnowing fork clearing the threshing floor describes this judgment. The winnowing fork is a harvesting tool that was used to toss the harvested and threshed grain into the air. Wind would carry the chaff while the heavier grain would fall to the ground. This allowed the grain to be gathered without the chaff, which would be swept up and burned. This harvesting process theologically describes the true believers in Christ ("His wheat") as separated out from the unbelievers ("the chaff") and it will be the unbelieving chaff that will suffer the unquenchable fire. The description of the unquenchable fire is opposed to the concept of the annihilation of the soul of the unbeliever upon death. Eternal destruction is being away from the presence of the Lord and the glory of His power (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

It is important to note the difference between the baptism of John and the baptism of Christ. John's baptism with water was for repentance to prepare the recipient to receive the One who would come. It did not baptize with the Holy Spirit, since the Spirit was yet to come (John 14:26, John 16:13, Acts 1:5). The baptism of the Holy Spirit is where Christ places those who are His into His body, the church (1 Corinthians 12:13; Colossians 1:24; Ephesians 1:22-23). John's prophecy of this future baptism is now fully realized by true believers in Christ today.

Conclusion

John the Baptism was the last prophet before the Messiah to warn the nation of impending judgment and to call for repentance. It is for this reason that Jesus could say there was none greater than John (Matthew 11:11). The kingdom of heaven was at hand and the ax was laid at the root of the tree. Without repentance, the destiny of an unquenchable fire awaits.

The message from John the Baptist is instructive for ministry today. John sought not to exalt himself (cf. John 3:30, "He must increase, but I must decrease"). He prepared people to receive Jesus rather than receive himself.

Like Jesus, John welcomed multitudes to respond to his message. Like Jesus, John reserved harsh condemnation for the religious leaders whose bad teaching and self-serving leadership had led the people astray in trusting in their ancestry rather than in God.

His message was a proclamation of the need for repentance for the kingdom of heaven was at hand. The joy of participation in the kingdom of God should move us to turn from sin and self to the Messiah who will reign benevolently.