

## Matthew 3:1-12

### Introduction

Two weeks ago we saw that “John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea... for this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness.’” In the Old Testament there was a whole “theology” of the wilderness. It wasn’t just a place. It was a lesson and a picture. It had meaning. When God redeemed His people from Egypt, He brought them out into the *wilderness* (desert; Jeremiah 2:2-3, 6-7; Amos 2:10; Ezek. 20:10-11; Psalm 78:52). He split rocks in the *wilderness* and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep. He made streams come out of the rock and caused waters to flow down like rivers (Psalm 78:15-16; 105:41; Numbers 21:16-17). In this way, and in many other ways, God provided for His people until He brought them through the wilderness and into the Promised Land.

Just like Israel’s exodus from Egypt was used as a picture of their future salvation (a second exodus from Egypt), so also Israel’s time in the wilderness was used as another very vivid picture of the abundance of future salvation. God said that one day He would once again bring His people out into the “wilderness of the peoples” (Ezekiel 20:35-38; Hosea 2:14-15). And there He would make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. He would put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, the olive, the cypress, the plane, and the pine tree together (Isaiah 41:18-19; 43:19-21). It is this transformation of the desert into a watered garden that pictures the salvation God brings to His people. So when in fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah “John the Baptist came preaching *in the wilderness* of Judea, ‘Repent, for the reign of the heavens has arrived’” he was announcing the arrival of this salvation. Yahweh had come down, and He was about to make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

- ✓ Isaiah 35:1 – The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing.

To put it very mildly indeed, this is GOOD NEWS. Everyone likes good news. But not everyone will benefit from this good news. Everyone likes good news, but in the end, this good news will not be for everyone. For *many*, the arrival of the kingdom (the reign of the heavens) will actually mean *bad* news.

### “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

The arrival of the kingdom was certainly something new, but the call to repent was nothing new. There was nothing at all complicated or vague about the meaning of repentance.

- ✓ Isaiah 55:7 – Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
- ✓ Ezekiel 18:30 – “Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, declares the Lord GOD. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin.

- ✓ 1 Kings 18:21 – And Elijah came near to all the people and said, “How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.”

It’s very simple: Forsake your sinful thoughts and ways and turn to joyfully follow after the LORD in true obedience. So we see that repentance isn’t just a prayer we pray or a feeling or emotion that we have. It’s a change of lifestyle. To repent is to change our *ways* because we have changed masters. That’s why in verse eight, John says: “*Bear fruit* in keeping with repentance”. This is the fruit of joyful obedience and glad submission to God’s will and God’s ways. And this is what the prophet Isaiah means when he says “*Prepare* the way of the Lord; make his paths *straight*.” “*Repent*, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” But John doesn’t just preach the message of repentance. You could say that in a sense he acts it out.

#### **Verse 4**

John was very different. He was strange and out of the ordinary. Luke says that he *lived* in the wilderness (1:80). So his diet consisted of the kind of simple, basic foods that one would find in the wilderness (locusts and honey). His clothing was rough and certainly much more uncomfortable than other clothes (Matthew 11:7-8). And the strangest thing of all is that we see all of this in the very one who came announcing the arrival of the kingdom of heaven – the transformation of the wilderness into a watered place of abundance and plenty! It seems inconsistent and out of place. What does it mean? Why should the glorious news of the coming of the kingdom be announced by a man living in the wilderness, wearing a garment of camel’s hair with a leather belt, and eating locusts and wild honey?

Well, the meaning is this: Before we can enter into the kingdom of the Messiah, before we can experience the blessings of God’s rule, we must first *humble* ourselves in true repentance. Apart from true repentance, apart from forsaking our sinful ways and turning to joyfully follow after the Lord in true obedience, there is no salvation. We shouldn’t be deceived, God is not mocked!

#### **Verses 5-6**

There was nothing else like this baptism in all of Israel’s history. The Jews practiced various ceremonial washings, but these were things that were repeated over and over again. John’s baptism was a one-time thing. When a Gentile converted to Judaism, he would be baptized as a sign that he was becoming part of a new people (the people of God). But a Jew would *never* be baptized in this way. After all, he was *already* a part of the people of God. John’s baptism, though, was not only a one-time act, he also baptized *Jews*! And what possible need could there be to baptize Jews – unless there is some sense in which they are not yet truly a part of the people of God? Even in the Old Testament, God had said that the salvation and kingdom of the Messiah would come not to every Jew, but to a *remnant* of the Jews.

- ✓ Micah 4:6-7 – In that day, declares the LORD, I will assemble the lame and gather those who have been driven away and those whom I have afflicted; and the lame I will make the remnant, and those who were cast off, a strong nation; and the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion from this time forth and forevermore.

- ✓ Isaiah 28:5 – In that day the LORD of hosts will be a crown of glory, and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people.
- ✓ Isaiah 10:20-23 – In that day the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no more lean on him who struck them, but will lean on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God. For though your people Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will return.

It was only a remnant of the Jews who survived the destruction of Jerusalem and eventually returned from exile. And in the same way, the prophets said that it would only be a remnant of the Jews who would enter into the kingdom of heaven – the kingdom of the Messiah (cf. Romans 9:27-28). When a Jew came out to the Jordan and submitted himself to John’s baptism, repenting and confessing his sins, what was he doing? He was joining the remnant – the true Israel. Because it was only the remnant that would inherit the promised kingdom of the Messiah.

We see from these verses that part of repentance is confessing our sins. To confess something is to acknowledge something or to *admit* something. So when we confess our sins, we take *responsibility* for our sins – *full* responsibility. Apart from God’s grace, this is impossibly hard. To confess is to stop hiding, and stop running, and stop making excuses. It is to make ourselves naked, and exposed, and completely and utterly vulnerable before God. And so we can see that ultimately, to confess is to be broken and undone as we *feel* the sentence of condemnation against us and seek God’s forgiveness and cleansing. It is this repentance, and this confession, and this cleansing that are all symbolized in John’s baptism. And so John is calling out from Israel a remnant in preparation for the coming of the Lord.

### Verses 7-8

The Pharisees and Sadducees weren’t coming out to be baptized themselves (NASB; NRSV). They were just coming out to watch and investigate this rogue prophet (ESV; NLT). But John immediately pounces: “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” Remember John’s choice of clothing? (“Now John wore a **garment of camel’s hair** and a **leather belt around his waist**.”) As it turns out, the Old Testament prophet Elijah dressed very distinctively in exactly the same way.

- ✓ 2 Kings 1:7-8 – [King Ahaziah] said to them, “What kind of man was he...?” They answered him, “He wore a **garment of hair**, with a **belt of leather about his waist**.” And he said, “It is Elijah.”

Remember John’s diet of locusts and wild honey, the food available in the wilderness? Well, Elijah also lived for a time in the wilderness east of the Jordan and his food was the bread and meat brought to him by the Ravens (1 Kings 17:1-7). The similarities would have been too obvious for the Jews to miss. Everything about John would have reminded the Jews of Malachi’s prophecy (cf. Mat. 16:14):

- ✓ Malachi 4:1-6 – For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the

sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts. Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.

Well, Elijah has come. John the Baptist is this Elijah (Mat. 11:14; 17:10-12). And so John is warning the people that the arrival of the kingdom doesn't *only* mean the blessings of salvation and the transformation of the desert into a watered garden. It also means a burning oven that will set ablaze and consume all the arrogant and all evildoers and all those who refuse to repent. *This* is why the Jews were going out to be baptized, repenting and confessing their sins! They were fleeing from the wrath to come. They were joining the remnant so that they might have good reason to *rejoice* in the arrival of the Messiah and His kingdom. But not the Pharisees and Sadducees. Like blind fools, completely unconcerned about their approaching doom, they were coming out to watch, and investigate, and find fault. And so John boldly warns them that they, too, must bear fruit in keeping with repentance. But why don't they? What excuse could they possibly give?

### **Verses 9-10**

“We're Jews. We don't need to be baptized. We're children of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. We don't need to fear God's wrath.” And to this John replies “I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham”. In the end, it matters not the tiniest little bit whether you are physical children of Abraham, but whether you are spiritual children of Abraham. It matters not whether you are part of the nation of Israel, but whether you are part of the *remnant*. It matters not whether you are a respected leader of the Jews, but whether you, too, are compelled to go out to John and be baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing your sins. *Everyone, without exception, must repent. Everyone, without exception, must flee from the wrath to come.*

So far we have learned that repentance is forsaking our sinful thoughts and ways and turning to joyfully follow after the Lord in true obedience. We have learned that repentance includes confession. No more running, or hiding, or excuses, but admitting and taking full responsibility – standing naked before God. We have been warned that only a remnant is being saved, because apart from repentance, there can only be the consuming fire of God's wrath. And now we see that everyone, without exception, must repent. No one is exempt. *No one*. It doesn't matter what home you grew up in, or how long you have known the gospel, or how many people you have led to the Lord. There is no substitute for repentance – not for anyone. And so John says to the children of Abraham (verse 10): “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit [the fruit of repentance] is cut down and thrown into the fire.” The coming of the kingdom is not all good news... at least not for everyone.

## Verse 11

John baptized with water for repentance. But the point of this baptism was just to prepare the people for the “real thing”. There is something about to happen that we would call apocalyptic; climactic, decisive, the dawning of a new age. The remnant will be baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire (or we could say “with the fire of the Holy Spirit”). But what will this mean?

- ✓ Isaiah 32:14-17 – For the palace is forsaken, the populous city deserted; the hill and the watchtower will become dens forever, a joy of wild donkeys, a pasture of flocks; ***until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field***, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest. ***Then justice will dwell in the wilderness***, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever.
- ✓ Isaiah 44:3 – For ***I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring***, and my blessing on your descendants.
- ✓ Cf. Joel 2:28-29

And so the people listening to John could say: “If we are part of the remnant, then we will soon be baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire. And if we are baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire, then we will experience the transformation of the wilderness into a fruitful field. We will experience all the infinite blessings of salvation in the promised kingdom of the Messiah.” So the baptism of the Holy Spirit is truly an apocalyptic event. We live in an apocalyptic age. We *have* the Holy Spirit! We are blessed beyond measure. But there is more, because John specifically says that the remnant will be baptized with the Holy Spirit *and fire*:

- ✓ Isaiah 4:2-4 – In that day the branch of the LORD shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel. And he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning.
- ✓ Zechariah 13:9 – And I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call upon my name, and I will answer them. I will say, “They are my people”; and they will say, “The LORD is my God.”
- ✓ Ezekiel 39:29; 36:26-27; Malachi 3:2-4

The prophets in the Old Testament had foretold that one day God would baptize the repentant remnant of His people with the Holy Spirit and fire. He would purge away their sins and burn away their iniquities. He would remove their hearts of stone and cause them to walk joyfully in His commandments. He would cleanse and purify His people from the inside out.

You see, these Jews who were going out to John to be baptized by him in the river Jordan, repenting and confessing their sins... these Jews who had gone out to join the remnant... they were standing right on the very brink. Somehow, and in some way they were about to experience what the faithful in Israel had been longing for ever since the days of Abraham. The kingdom was at hand. And they were about to be baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire. Can you

imagine?!? They were about to be recreated as the true people of God – the very first citizens of the Messiah’s kingdom. But what about the Jews who went out to John only to watch and find fault?

### **Verse 12**

The unrepentant, religious leaders were also standing on the brink. They, too, were about to experience the arrival of God’s rule in the Messiah. But for them, this would mean not the purifying fire of the Holy Spirit, but the unquenchable fire of God’s wrath.

### **Conclusion**

Make no mistake, we live in an apocalyptic age – the age of the kingdom. We live in an age of baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire – a baptism that purifies the remnant and lavishes upon them every last blessing of God’s salvation (2 Cor. 1:21-22; Eph. 1:13-14). But we also live in an age of the unquenchable fire of God’s wrath – a wrath that burns the chaff and consumes every unfruitful tree. Jesus says: “Whoever does not believe is condemned already... *now* is the judgment of this world” (John 3:18; 12:31). The arrival of the kingdom is good news for some, but bad news for others. And the difference is repentance.

- ✓ Isaiah 1:27-28, 31 – Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness. But rebels and sinners shall be broken together, and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed... and the strong shall become tinder, and his work a spark, and both of them shall burn together, with none to quench them.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has arrived.” Have you confessed your sins? Have you fled from the wrath to come? Have you been baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire? There is only one who can baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. He is the one who is mightier than John the Baptist. He is the one whose sandals John the Baptist was not even worthy to carry. He is the one whose winnowing fork is in His hand. And He is the one who laid down His life for sinners. He is Jesus Christ.

So then, just like those who went out to John in the wilderness, let us repent. Let us forsake our sinful thoughts and ways and turn to joyfully follow after the LORD in true obedience. And for those of us who have repented and are now part of the remnant, let us rejoice to know that the *kingdom* is ours. We have been baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire. God has lavished upon us all the blessings of His salvation. Now let’s go out and live like it (Matthew 5-7)!

## Teaching our Children

- Q.** Since the kingdom of heaven was coming, what did John the Baptist tell the people to do?  
**A.** Repent!
- Q.** What does it mean to repent?  
**A.** See I. A. & B. Emphasize God's enabling grace in all repentance.
- Q.** How did John the Baptist dress and what did he eat?  
**A.** He wore a garment of camel's hair with a leather belt and his food was locusts and wild honey.
- Q.** Why do you think the wonderful news of the kingdom of heaven would be announced by a man who lived like this?  
**A.** John the Baptist was trying to show the people that if they wanted to enter into the kingdom of heaven, they first needed to *humble* themselves with real repentance.
- Q.** Why would John baptize Jews – people who were already children of Abraham?  
**A.** John baptized Jews so that they could be part of the remnant, the true people of God. These were the people who would enter God's kingdom and be saved. (See Scriptures under III. B.)
- Q.** When the Jews were baptized, they were confessing their sins. This was a part of their repentance. What does it mean to confess our sins?  
**A.** Admit. Take responsibility. Stop running, hiding, or making excuses. Stand completely open and exposed before God. Know and feel how much we deserve God's wrath and how much we need His forgiveness.
- Q.** What warning did John give to all those who refused to repent?  
**A.** They would bring upon themselves the fire of God's blazing wrath (See Mat. 3:7, 10, 12 and the Scripture under IV. C.)
- Q.** Why did the Pharisees and Sadducees think that they didn't need to repent or fear God's wrath?  
**A.** They thought they were "safe" just because they were children of Abraham.
- Q.** But John the Baptist said that God could make even the stones into children of Abraham." What does this mean for the children of Abraham?  
**A.** This means that it's not enough to be children of Abraham. *Everyone, without exception,* must repent (even if we grow up in a Christian home).
- Q.** What did John the Baptist say that God was going to do for the remnant who really repented?  
**A.** God would baptize His people with the Holy Spirit and fire.
- Q.** What would this baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire *mean*?  
**A.** Read and marvel at the Scriptures under VI. A.

Review "Conclusion A. B. & C." Point your children to Christ. What a sacred and joyful task this is!