

Matthew

Chapter 3

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MATTHEW CHAPTER 3

Chapter 2 ended with Jesus, Joseph, and Mary taking their residence in Nazareth. The third chapter begins some 25 to 30 years later with the arrival of John the Baptist. During these intervening years the Scripture is silent except for one incident at the temple when Jesus was twelve (Luke 2:41-50). All we know about those silent years is that Jesus was obedient to God and that He grew in wisdom and stature (Luke 2:51-52).

The Messiah Introduced. We now come to the introduction of the Messiah to the world. His first public appearance will be at His baptism. The Messiah will first be preceded by a forerunner who will prepare His way—John the Baptist.

John's title "the Baptist" can obscure what was the main thrust of his ministry—an announcement that the judgment of God was near with the coming of the Messiah. Therefore he called people to turn from their sins. They made a public acknowledgment of their confession at John's baptism.

John's preaching created a widespread revival (vs. 5) and his followers constituted a significant movement within Judaism. Interestingly, his disciples maintained a separate existence from the Christians even beyond the New Testament period (see Acts 19:1-6). His ministry is recorded by Josephus (*Antiquities* 9. 116-119) and is given more space than the ministry of Jesus. However, as the Scripture will clearly state, the significance of John lay *only* in his relationship to Jesus. Whenever John is mentioned in the gospel, it is to throw light on the mission of Jesus. As John himself said, "He must increase, I must decrease" (John 3:30).

THE MINISTRY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST (3:1-12)

John the Baptist arrives as the herald of Jesus. He prepares the way for the coming of the king.

Matt. 3:1 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the desert of Judea

In those days This is a general indication of time contrasted to Luke's precise dating. About thirty years had lapsed between this point and the end of chapter two. Matthew passes over the vast majority of Jesus' life to get to his chief aim—His public ministry. This will include His death and resurrection.

The phrase also refers to a special time (language similar to that used by the prophets Zephaniah 1:15; Amos 9:11; Zechariah 12:3-4; Isaiah 10:20). It is a special time of revelation.

John He was apparently the first to baptize others (proselyte baptism and the baptisms at Qumran were self-administered).

the Baptist "The Baptist" was a kind of nickname.

came, This word "arrived" or "came" is same Greek word used to describe appearance of Jesus in verse 13.

preaching in the desert of Judea This is the land that drops down from the Judean hills to the Dead Sea.

Matt. 3:2 and saying, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.”

Note on a variant reading: Some manuscripts do not have *and* before *saying*.

and saying, “Repent, Matthew alone summarizes John’s preaching in the same words as Jesus (4:17). John is not a rival of Jesus but a preacher of the same message.

Repent means more than “sorry” or “change your mind.” It has the idea of turning back to God in obedience to Him. Though repentance is not specifically linked with forgiveness of sins in this passage (as in Mark and Luke), forgiveness has already been alluded to (1:21). Matthew mentions forgiveness of sins again in 26:28 in connection with the blood of the covenant. Forgiveness of sins is presupposed in the confession of sins (v. 6)

for the Kingdom of Heaven This means the establishment of God’s rightful kingdom or the Messianic age. Matthew is the only New Testament writer to use this phrase (thirty-three times). He probably does so to avoid the unnecessary use of the word God. However, on occasion he does speak of the “kingdom of God” (12:28; 19:24; 21:31,43). There is no difference in meaning between these two terms.

John’s message is repeated by Jesus in the same words (4:17) and later by the disciples that Jesus sends out (10:7). The program of John and Jesus are the same.

has come near The kingdom has arrived with the presence of the king. Thus the time for decision has come. Matthew is the only gospel writer to mention the nearness of the kingdom.

Matt. 3:3 For this is he who was spoken of through Isaiah the prophet saying, “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, be making his paths straight.’ ”

Note on variants readings: A couple of Syriac manuscripts do not have the *phrase A voice of one calling in the desert*. Two manuscripts do not have the phrase *be making His paths straight*.

For this is he who was spoken of through Isaiah the prophet ” Isaiah 40:3 is cited in all four gospels to describe John the Baptist. All gospels ascribe these words to Isaiah the prophet.

saying, “A voice of one calling in the desert, A solitary voice in the desert.

‘Prepare the way of the Lord, The coming of Jesus is the coming of the Lord. God has come down and visited His people!

be making his paths straight.’ Crooked path would be straightened when kings walked upon them.

Matt. 3:4 Now John himself was customarily having his clothing from camel hairs, and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

For John himself The word *himself* stands first in the sentence in Greek text and emphasizes that John's manner of living was in accord with the prophecy of the forerunner.

was customarily having his clothing from camel hairs, John would have reminded the people of Elijah in a number of ways.

1. His clothing would remind the people of Elijah. For a garment of hair see Zechariah 13:4.
2. His sudden appearance on the scene of history.
3. The solitary life that he led.
4. His uncompromising message.
5. The eventual clash with the king and his wife.

The relationship between John and Elijah will later be explained by Matthew (11:14; 17:12-13).

and a leather belt around his waist See 2 Kings 1:8 where the words describing Elijah are quoted almost verbatim.

and his food was locusts The locusts are still eaten to this day in the Middle East. William Hendriksen notes, "Aversion to eating of insects, rich in protein may be cultural. In other countries insects are part of the diet. Roasted and salted grasshoppers can be bought in Mexico city. Edible insects keep Australian aborigines from starving. And even in the United States of America there are gourmet food stores that carry chocolate-coated bees and ants. Is it not possible that the Baptist was a little ahead of us, that is, that locusts and other insects may fill a future need?" (Hendriksen, p. 218).

and wild honey. John would give the aura of a holy man but he was much more than that. John symbolizes the breaking of the centuries of prophetic silence recognized by the Jews themselves (cf. 1 Maccabees 4:46; 9:27; 14:41). Here is a new thing; a voice from God out of the silence. Prophecy appears again to the people of Israel.

Matt. 3:5 Then Jerusalem was proceeding out to him, and all Judea, and all the surrounding region of the Jordan.

Then Jerusalem was proceeding out to him, Imperfect tense in the Greek stressing a repeated process over some time. Matthew does not say all Jerusalem came out to be baptized by John as does Mark, perhaps because Jerusalem was the center of opposition to Jesus' later public ministry.

and all Judea, This would be a larger area than merely Jerusalem.

and all the surrounding region of the Jordan. Mark does not have this phrase though it is a natural fact that could be presumed. What the gospel writers are stressing is that there was a great response to John's baptism.

Matt. 3:6 And they were being baptized by him in the Jordan river, while confessing their sins.

Note on a variant reading: Many manuscripts do not have the word *river*.

And they were being baptized by him This matches “were coming out” and underscores the success of John’s mission.

in the Jordan river, They came out to John where he was.

while confessing their sins John’s baptism was not for ceremonial purification but rather to flee from the coming judgment. They confessed their sins during the actual baptism.

Matt. 3:7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism he said to them, “Offspring of vipers! Who has warned you to flee from the coming wrath?”

Note on a variant reading: Only two Greek manuscripts (*Sinaiticus* and *Vaticanus*) do not have *his*.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism These are the opponents of John and later of Jesus. They are mentioned as acting together again only in 16:1. They are better known for their mutual hostility.

The text does not say they were baptized although some may have been sincere about believing. Most probably came out of curiosity (their lack of belief is pointed out in 21:25-27,32).

Many may have been so angered by John’s message that they did not submit to baptism (see Luke 7:29,30).

he said to them, “Offspring of vipers! This is not calculated to win potential converts! Jesus would later use the same phrase in His own attacks on the Pharisees (12:34; 23:33). This comment is only used in reference to Pharisees in Matthew.

Who has warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” Obviously John doubted their sincerity in coming to his baptism. For further emphasis on the coming wrath see 1 Thessalonians 1:10; Ephesians 5:6; Colossians 3:6.

Matt. 3:8 Therefore produce fruit worthy of repentance.

Therefore produce fruit worthy of repentance The singular fruit is a collective noun. Jesus would later use this same metaphor (7:16-20). John wants concrete evidence of their repentance, not just the mere citing of words.

Matt. 3:9 And do not begin to consider to say among yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you, that God is able to raise up from these stones children to Abraham.

Note on a variant reading: A couple of manuscripts do not have *among yourselves*.

And do not begin to consider to say among yourselves, John anticipates a typical objection they would have to his baptism.

‘We have Abraham as our father.’ They considered that physical descent from Abraham granted them an automatic immunity from God’s coming wrath. Reliance should not be on race. Abraham’s children are those who share his faith.

For I say to you, that God is able to raise up from these stones children to Abraham. Isaiah said that Abraham was the “rock from which you were hewn” (51:1,2) but John says that any other stone would serve God’s purpose. The close similarity in Aramaic and Hebrew between the words for *stones* and *children* is a devastating play on words.

Matt. 3:10 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree, therefore, that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Note on a variant reading: Two manuscripts do not have the word *good*.

Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; The imminence of the judgment is stressed by the adverb “even now” which is placed first in the Greek sentence.

every tree, therefore, that does not produce good fruit is cut down

and thrown into the fire. This metaphor is repeated verbatim in 7:19 by Jesus. The idea of an unfruitful tree cut down and thrown in the fire is common in Jewish literature.

Matt. 3:11 As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is more powerful than I, of whom I am not worthy to carry his sandals. he himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Note on a variant reading: A few manuscripts do not have the words *after me*.

As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, contrasts to Jesus Himself who will baptize them with the Spirit. John’s baptism is “with reference to repentance” or “because of repentance” or “in agreement with repentance.” The phrase is best understood this way rather than “unto repentance.”

but he who is coming after me This phrase seems to be a technical term for the Messiah.

is more powerful than I, John is merely the forerunner.

of whom I am not worthy to carry his sandals. The word can also mean “take off” his sandals. A Rabbi’s disciple was expected to act virtually as his slave but to remove the shoes was too low a task even for a disciple.

he himself The word ‘He’ is placed first in the Greek sentence for emphasis. This contrasts John’s ministry with Jesus.

will baptize you with the Holy Spirit Jesus’ baptism will be with the Holy Spirit.

and fire. This has reference to the purifying work of the Holy Spirit in those who believe in Jesus.

Matt. 3:12 And his winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor; and he will gather together his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn up with unquenchable fire.

And his winnowing fork is in his hand, The winnowing fork is used by the coming Messiah to throw the mixed wheat and chaff in the air. This is usually done on high ground during a good wind which separates the lighter chaff from the heavier wheat.

and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor; The cleansing will be thorough.

and he will gather together his wheat into the barn, The wheat is put into storage (13:30).

but the chaff The chaff becomes fuel.

he will burn up with unquenchable fire. The fire that purifies will also destroy all that which is worthless. This is the second metaphor of judgment (vs. 10). “Unquenchable” has the same meaning as eternal in 18:8; 25:41. It is the Greek word *asbestos*. Note also that the word *His* is used 3 times in this verse.

THE MESSIAH REVEALS HIMSELF TO THE WORLD AND IS BAPTIZED (3:13-17)

The babe born in Bethlehem has grown to be a man. He will now reveal Himself to the world. His first public act is to be baptized by John in Jordan River.

Matt. 3:13 Then Jesus arrived from the Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.

Then Jesus arrived from the Galilee The same term is used of both John and Jesus.

to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. Jesus chose to be baptized by John and to identify with him. In all four gospels, Jesus submits to John’s baptism (though the baptism of Jesus is not recorded in the Gospel of John). Jesus came for the purpose of being baptized.

Matt. 3:14 But John was attempting to prevent him, saying, “I myself have need to be baptized by you, and do you yourself come to me?”

Note on a variant reading: Two Greek manuscripts (*Sinaiticus* and *Vaticanus*) along with one Egyptian manuscript read *he was attempting* rather than *John was attempting*.

But John was attempting to prevent him, Matthew does not explain how John recognized Jesus as different from the crowd. It is possible that they had had some previous contact. Luke 1:36 tells us of the joint traditions between Jesus’ and John’s family (Elizabeth being a kinsmen to Mary). Yet we do not have a clear answer as to how John knew Jesus was the Messiah before the Holy Spirit came down and identified Him.

saying, “I myself have need to be baptized by you, John recognized that he was the one needing the baptism.

and do you yourself come to me?” He cannot understand why Jesus would submit to his baptism.

Matt. 3:15 But Jesus answered and said, “Let it be so now; for in this way it is proper to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented.

Note on variant readings: After consented two Syriac manuscripts read *to be baptized*. Between verses 15 and 16 two Latin manuscripts describe the baptism of Jesus as follows: *And when Jesus was being baptized a great light flashed (a tremendous light flashed around) from the water, so that all who gathered were afraid.*

But Jesus answered and said, “Let it be so now;” This is the first words of Jesus in Matthew’s gospel.

for in this way it is proper to fulfill all righteousness.” Many interpretations of what this difficult phrase means. The best answer seems to be that Jesus is referring to fulfilling God’s will in the establishment of the salvation which He promised. Righteousness is not just being good or correct according to the Mosaic law but it is the same as having an obedient relationship to God.

Then he consented. John finally agreed.

Matt. 3:16 When Jesus was baptized, he came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon him.

Note on a variant reading. Some manuscripts do not have the words *to Him* in the text. Two Greek manuscripts (*Sinaiticus* and *Vaticanus*), along with one Egyptian manuscript and the testimony of the Church Father Irenaeus, do not have the word *the* before Spirit and again before God. Instead of *descending* as some manuscripts read *descending out of heaven as*. Two Greek manuscripts (*Sinaiticus* and *Vaticanus*), along with a couple of Latin manuscripts, do not have the word and.

When Jesus was baptized, Why was Jesus baptized? Not because He was a sinner, nor simply to identify with John’s movement. In being baptized Jesus showed His solidarity with the people in their need. Jesus was baptized because as the Messiah He was a representative person, the embodiment of Israel whether as King or as righteous servant (cf. Isaiah 53:11; both concepts emerge in vs. 17). Jesus had not need of repentance but Israel did and here He identifies with His people.

he came up immediately from the water; He came up immediately because there was no need to confess sin.

and behold, the heavens were opened to him, Common metaphor in the Old Testament (Ezekiel 1:1; Isaiah 64:1) and it refers (as here) to a key episodes of God’s revelation and provision (see Acts 7:56; 10:11; John 1:51). The two worlds (the visible and invisible) merge.

Just as the veil of the temple was rent in twain to symbolize the perfect access of all men to God (Heb 10:19,20), so here the heavens are ‘rent asunder’ (same Greek word) to show how near God is to Jesus and Jesus to God (Griffith, cited by Broadus, p. 60).

and he saw the Spirit of God Luke tells us the Spirit came down in bodily form (Luke 3:22).

descending as a dove, and coming upon him. This reminds us of Genesis 1:2 the Spirit “hovering” over the water. The dove is sometimes used as a symbol for Israel (Hosea 7:11).

We should not assume that Jesus had no previous experience with the Holy Spirit. This incident symbolizes the beginning of His Messianic work. In the ancient world there was frequent association between dove and deity. The gospels do not tell us whether the crowds witnessed the event, but the silence is probably to be interpreted as meaning they did not.

Matt. 3:17 And behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

Note on variant readings: After *said* a few manuscripts read *to Him*. Instead of *This is* some manuscripts read *You are*.

And behold, a voice from heaven said, The phrase refers to a “divine voice.”

“This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” The Father testifies to the Son by means of the Holy Spirit (Trinity). He is now formally marked out as the Son of God in conjunction with the beginning of His work. Jesus is the unique Son, the powerful anointed one (in analogy of triumphant king) and the humble Servant who obediently accomplishes the will of God, eventually through suffering and death. This dual picture is found again later in the Gospel, through the verbatim repetition of the same words (17:5). “Beloved” may be an independent title of the Messiah.

SUMMARY TO CHAPTER 3

Chapter 3 picks up the life of Jesus some thirty years after the end of chapter 2. The first section of chapter 3 (verses 1-12) record the sudden appearance of the forerunner or herald of the Messiah—John the Baptist. He arrives as a fulfillment of Isaiah 40:1-3. John preached in the wilderness of Judea and Matthew records that large crowds from all parts of the country came to see and hear him.

John’s appearance, lifestyle, and message of impending judgment was reminiscent of the Old Testament prophet Elijah. He implored the crowds to be converted, that is to change their way of living. This caused many to be baptized by him while they were confessing their sins.

Among those who arrived at John’s baptism were the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees were the religious legalists while the Sadducees were the unbelieving wealthy landowners. John had strong words for each of them. He made it clear that mere physical descent from Abraham was not enough to save them. God could raise up stones to make children of Abraham if He so desired. The point is that God did not need them, they needed Him!

John emphasized the judgment was impending—the Lord was about to bring about a separation between the grain and the worthless chaff. The grain went into the barns, the chaff was to be burned. Likewise those who believed were to be brought into God’s kingdom, those who did not, to judgment.

John made it clear that One greater than him was about to arrive. John’s baptism was with water, the One coming after him would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. This referred to the Day of Pentecost as well as the final judgment of the wicked.

The next section (verses 13-17) records the arrival of Jesus to be baptized by John. John objects by saying that it should be the other way around—Jesus should baptize him. The first public statement of Jesus indicates that it is necessary for Him to be baptized to fulfill all the righteous requirements. Since Jesus is the One for whom John prepares the way, He cannot remain unrelated to the work of John. It comes as a great surprise to John that Jesus submits Himself to John’s baptism. John, like the rest of us, need Jesus’ baptism. Jesus needs no baptism of repentance nevertheless He undergoes baptism as an example for all who follow Him in belief.

After Jesus was baptized He went immediately out of the water. There was no confession of sins for Him as was the case with the other people who were baptized.

The baptism served as the formal beginning of His ministry wherein He received the anointing of the Holy Spirit together with the Father’s attesting of His Sonship (note the Trinitarian association). All of this is in keeping with the will of God who will bring salvation to the world. John and Jesus have performed their respective roles, “fulfilling all righteousness.”

The Trinity was together at Jesus’ coming out of the water—the Holy Spirit came upon Him as a dove, and the voice of the Father from heaven giving approval of His Son. Hence we have the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together at the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus.

QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTER 3

HOW ARE THE WORDS “WITH FIRE” RELATED TO “WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT”

Does “with fire” furthers describes Holy Spirit baptism or does it describe a different aspect of baptism altogether?

Option 1. They Refer To The Same Thing

If spirit and fire refer to the same thing, they both may describe judgment or blessing. Many scholars believe that John preached only a message of judgment and both phrases refer to judgment. Therefore the Holy Spirit is understood to be a destroying wind that works together with fire. The wind blows away the chaff. Others believe that both phrases refer to the blessing experienced by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The fire refers to the tongues of fire that were exhibited. Problem with this view is that fire in the following verse clearly refers to judgment.

Option 2. Twofold Baptism

Because of this, many see a twofold baptism—one for the righteous (the Holy Spirit) and the other for the unrighteous (fire). It may be better to see these as one baptism which is experienced as either a judgment or a blessing. The fire will destroy the wicked but will purify the believer.

QUESTION

HOW IS JESUS RELATED TO GOD THE FATHER AND THE HOLY SPIRIT?

The Bible teaches in both the Old and New Testaments that there is one God. The prophet Isaiah records God saying,

Before me there was no God formed, nor shall there be after me (Isaiah 43:10).

In the New Testament the Apostle Paul told Timothy, “For there is one God” (1 Timothy 2:5). It is the united testimony of Scripture that there is only one God. But Scripture also testifies that within the nature of the one God there are three distinct personalities. They are named the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. These three personalities are coequal and coeternal. They constitute the one God; this is known as the Trinity. Although the Scriptures do not explain how the one God can be three separate persons, it does clearly teach it. The Bible teaches that there is a person called the Father, and that person is God.

Paul, an apostle (not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father) (Galatians 1:1).

The Son

The Scriptures also speak of a Second Person who is different from the Father. He is called the Son and He too is designated God. The Bible says:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:1,14).

The Holy Spirit

There is a third person revealed in Scripture who is different from both the Father and Son. He is known as the Holy Spirit. He is also called God:

But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit? You have not lied to men but to God” (Acts 5:3,4).

Therefore the Father is God, the Son Jesus is God and the Holy Spirit is God. Yet as we have seen, the Bible says there is only one God. We conclude that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are the one God. They are one in nature and in purpose, yet distinct in personality. While the Trinity may be beyond our reason and understanding, it is what the Scripture consistently teaches regarding the nature of God.

Work Together

For example, each member of the Trinity (the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) was involved in Christ’s resurrection. Jesus was raised up by the coordinate power of God. The Bible teaches God the Father participated in the resurrection.

Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father (Romans 6:4).

Jesus was also raised by His own power.

No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from my Father (John 10:18).

The Bible teaches that Jesus was also made alive by the Holy Spirit.

But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you (Romans 8:11).

Therefore, we have the testimony of Scripture that Christ was raised by the Father, by Himself, and by the Holy Spirit. The mystery of the nature of God as revealed in the Bible includes these teachings:

1. The Bible teaches that one eternal God exists.
2. Within the nature of the one God are three distinct persons. They are coequal and coeternal.
3. These three persons are God the Father, God the Son (Jesus) and God the Holy Spirit.
4. Though distinct, the three persons of God always work in harmony.
5. The Bible gives examples of the Trinity working together such as in Christ's resurrection.

QUESTION

WHY DO THE DIFFERENT GOSPEL WRITERS ATTRIBUTE DIFFERENT WORDS TO GOD THE FATHER AT THE BAPTISM OF JESUS?

When we compare the synoptic gospels that record the baptism of Jesus, we find that there are differences in the statements of God the Father when Jesus came out of the water.

Mark and Luke have the voice of the Father speaking directly to Jesus, "You are my beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased" (Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22).

On the other hand, Matthew (3:17) writes, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased"

Which one is correct? Did God address Jesus directly *You* or did He address John or the crowds with His statement *This is*?

First, we should assume that both statements were made to Jesus. This is not really a convincing way to address the problem. Neither should we assume that there is some error in the text in Matthew—there is simply no evidence of any corruption of the text.

They Have The Same Meaning

As we examine the passages we discover that whatever the exact words might have been used, the meaning is still the same—God the Father is pleased with His Son.

Most likely the voice from heaven was in Aramaic or Hebrew rather than Greek. If this be the case then we have the different gospel writers translating it for us into Greek. The meaning is still the same, the emphasis is slightly different in Matthew. Any difference in wording is certainly minor and does not effect the sense of the passage.

Therefore a comparison of the gospel gives the intent of the words of God the Father, if not their exact form. Therefore there is no contradiction when all the accounts are placed together. God the Father was acknowledging His pleasure in the Son—all three gospels agree with this assessment.