




**Sunday School Lesson**  
**Matt. 3:1-12**  
 by Lorin L. Cranford  
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**When Bad News is Good News**



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**Quick Links to the Study**

I. Context

- a. Historical
- b. Literary

II. Message

- a. Ministry, vv. 1-6
- b. Preaching, vv. 7-12

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This study concerning John the Baptizer is taken from Mt. 3:1-12, which is but one of four gospel sources depicting the ministry of John. The others include Mk. 1:1-8; Lk. 3:1-9; and John 1:19-28. In the Synoptic Gospel sources, Mark's account was written first and provided an independently used source for both Matthew and Luke. The Johannine gospel "does its own thing" with a very different account, that may or may not have had access to Mark or either of the other Synoptic Gospels. Probably it didn't.

All four accounts will be utilized with three of them supplementing the Matthean account.

**I. Context**

Since this study is a continuation of the Advent studies from Matthew's gospel, we will utilize the relevant historical and literary materials for [the previous study](#) in Mt. 24:36-44.

**a. Historical**

The **external history**, that is, the compositional history, of the Gospel of Matthew comes up against the anonymous nature of the document at the outset. That is, no author identification is contained inside the document itself. The heading, "The Gospel according to Matthew," usually printed in most English translations reflects the Greek heading KATA MAΘΘΑΙΟΝ, which was added to the document after it had gone through about a century of being copied after the initial writing of the document in the late 60s to middle 70s of the first Christian century. The heading, which links Matthew with this document, reflects the viewpoint of post-apostolic Christian tradition as to authorship. As Howard Clark Kee ("The Gospel of Matthew," *The Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible*, iPreach) describes:

From the early 2nd cent. down to the present, Christians have believed that the first gospel in the NT was also the first to be written and that the author was Matthew the tax collector, a disciple of Jesus (9:9). The source of this persistent belief can be traced back as far as ca. A.D. 130, when Papias, a bishop in Hierapolis, a city of Asia Minor, wrote a work titled "Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord." His writing, which is known only from fragments quoted by later Christian writers, reports that Matthew, the disciple, compiled the sayings of the Lord in Hebrew. Those who have quoted Papias seem to have accepted his statement without question as referring to the First Gospel.

Yet, several major barriers must be overcome before this ancient Christian tradition gains full acceptance. Kee addresses one of these in relation to the major source of that tradition with Papias:

There are several difficulties with this assumption, however. (a) The gospel consists of a rather full account of Jesus' public ministry, not merely of a series of sayings. (b) Detailed analysis of Matt. shows that the author used Mark as one of his sources (see below). (c) Mark and therefore Matt., for which Mark was a source, were written in Greek, not Hebrew. In view of these difficulties, it is plausible to assume that Papias is referring, not to Matt. as we know it, but perhaps to a now lost collection of sayings of Jesus.

Other obstacles exist as well. Most notable among them is the difficulty in explaining how a Jewish tax collector, whose job automatically placed him on the fringe of Jewish religious life, could develop the skills

to be able to argue his case for Jesus as the promised Messiah using patterns of scribal argumentation ranked among the best one can find in ancient Jewish writings. The presentation of his case reflects persuasion skills matching and following thought patterns found among the most skilled of the ancient rabbis in the Mishnah etc. Several other barriers also exist in regard to this early church tradition and are a part of the challenges to be faced in attempting to assert the accuracy of Matthew as the author of the first gospel.

For me, it's better to speak of the Matthean community, without fully assuming the early church tradition, as the source of this document. This divinely inspired document arose out of a desire to defend the belief in Jesus as the promised Messiah prophesied in the Hebrew Bible. Evidently this need was occasioned by the First Jewish War (appx. 66-70 AD), which resulted in the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and a huge fear among Jewish people for the continuing existence of their way of life and religious heritage. The religious community of mostly Jewish believers, possibly in the Roman province of Syria in either Damascus or Antioch -- or both -- came under strong pressure to abandon their Christian faith in favor of the synagogue tradition of Judaism as a way to help preserve that threatened heritage. God inspired this community -- along with individuals within it -- to produce the Gospel of Matthew in order to demonstrate just the opposite. In order to be consistent with what God had begun in the Old Testament faithful Jews should accept Jesus as their Messiah, since Christ represented the culmination of the Old Testament revelation and promises for His covenant people.

The **internal history**, that is, the historical setting for the ministry of John, is identified by Matthew in two ways in verse one: (1) Time: "in those days" and (2) Place: "in the wilderness of Judea."

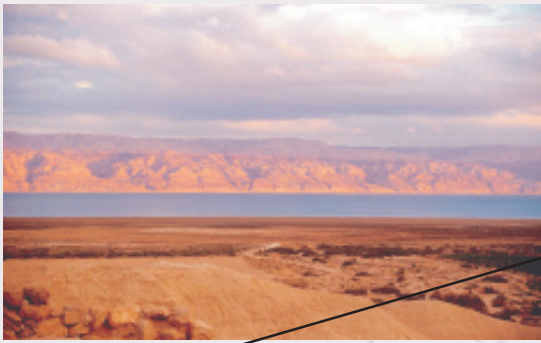
Matthew's time indicator, "in those days", is rather broad, and serves mostly to make a transition from the Infancy Stories (chaps 1-2) into the main body of his story of Jesus. Luke, however, provides what amounts to the most precise time indicator found in the New Testament, with his (Lk. 3:1-2, NRSV): "1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness." William Baird ("The Gospel According to Luke," *Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible*, iPreach) provides a helpful summation of these verses:

*The Prophet in Historical Perspective.* Considerable time has elapsed since the previous narrative. Again Luke is anxious to set his account in the context of contemporary events. It is the fifteenth year of the Emperor Tiberius; this would be A.D. 28-29. The rulers of Palestine are listed. Over Judea is Pontius Pilate, a procurator appointed by Rome; he ruled from A.D. 26 to 36, and his presence in Palestine is confirmed by an inscription found recently at Caesarea, his capital city. Ruler of Galilee is Herod — a son of Herod the Great known as Herod Antipas, whose realm also included Perea E of the Jordan. The title tetrarch originally referred to the ruler of a 4th of a region, but in Hellenistic times it could be used for any ruler of a petty kingdom. Since Luke lists 4 Palestinian rulers here, he may intend the title to carry its original meaning. Over Ituraea and Trachonitis rules Philip. He too was a son of Herod the Great and half brother of Antipas; his area was to the N and E of the Sea of Galilee. Lysanias is tetrarch of Abilene — a region still farther to the N. It is known that a certain Lysanias ruled this region in the first cent. B.C., but the man mentioned here is perhaps Lysanias II.

3:2a. Luke also gives the religious setting of his story. It takes place during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. This statement is confusing, since there could be only one high priest at a time. According to Jewish custom a man was appointed to the office for life. The Romans, however, prevented this practice and appointed high priests by their own authority. Thus Annas held the office from A.D. 6 to 15, while Caiaphas (his son-in-law) was recognized as high priest from A.D. 18 to 36. Perhaps the Jews still considered Annas to hold the position, or it may have been that Annas was the real power behind the high-priesthood of the younger man.

In spite of the chronological problems in "lining up the ducks" in Luke's list, it does appear that Luke is setting John's ministry in the late 20s of the beginning Christian era.

Matthew's place indicator, "in the wilderness of Judea", is described in the online [Easton's Bible Dictionary](#) as "The 'wilderness of Judea' (Matthew 3:1) is a wild, barren region, lying between the Dead Sea and the Hebron Mountains. It is the 'Jeshimon' mentioned in 1 Samuel 23:19." This is the only place in the Bible where this term, ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ τῆς Ἰουδαίας, is used. Mark (1:4) simply says ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ ("in the wilderness) without further description, as does also Luke (3:2) with the identical words. This region was located mostly at the north end of the Dead Sea where the Jordan River empties into the sea. As the picture on the following page



suggests, the area was barren and not an attractive place to live. Most of [John's ministry](#) was conducted in this region. As William A. Simmons ("John the Baptist," [Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology](#)) says

Although his formative years were lived in obscurity in the desert (Luke 1:80), his public ministry ended nearly four hundred years of prophetic silence. John was that voice crying in the wilderness preparing the way for the coming Messiah (Isa 40:3; Matt 3:3; Mark 1:2-3; Luke 3:3-6). In this sense his message and ministry marked the culmination of the law and the prophets, but heralded the inbreaking of the kingdom of God (Matt 11:12; Luke 16:16). So John was truly a transitional figure, forming the link between the Old and New Testaments. He spans the ages with one foot firmly planted in the Old Testament and the other squarely placed in the New.

### b. Literary

In Matthew's literary design, this narrative begins the discussion of Jesus' public ministry as is reflected in the [literary outline](#) of the first gospel:

The Prologue Matt. 1-2

Book One: The Son begins to proclaim the Kingdom Matt. 3:1-7:29

**Narrative: Beginnings of the ministry Matt. 3:1-4:25**

Discourse: The Sermon on the Mount Matt. 5:1-7:29

Book Two: The mission of Jesus and his disciples in Galilee Matt. 8:1-11:1

Narrative: The cycle of nine miracle stories Matt. 8:1-9:38

Discourse: The mission, past and future Matt. 10:1-11:1

Book Three: Jesus meets opposition from Israel Matt. 11:2-13:53

Narrative: Jesus disputes with Israel and condemns it Matt. 11:2-12:50

Discourse: Jesus withdraws from Israel into parabolic speech Matt. 13:1-53

Book Four: The Messiah forms his church and prophesies his passion Matt. 13:54-18:35

Narrative: The itinerant Jesus prepares for the church by his deeds Matt. 13:54-17:27

Discourse: Church life and order Matt. 18:1-35

Book Five: The Messiah and his church on the way to the passion Matt. 19:1-25:46

Narrative: Jesus leads his disciples to the cross as he confounds his enemies. Matt. 19:1-23:29

Discourse: The Last Judgment Matt. 24-25

The Climax: Death-Resurrection Matt. 26-28

Each gospel writer introduces the story of John in his own unique manner as is reflected in the listing of pericopes sequentially for each gospel account:

#### Matthew:

1. Genealogy: Abraham to David 1:2-6
2. Genealogy: David to Joseph 1:7-16
3. Genealogy: Summary Comment 1:17
4. Angelical announcement to Joseph 1:18-23
5. Joseph's obedience 1:24-25
6. Visit by wise men. 2:1-12
7. Flight to Egypt 2:13-15

#### Mark:

- Title 1:1
1. **John the Baptizer 1:2-8**
  2. Jesus' baptism 1:9-11
  3. Jesus' temptation 1:12-13

#### Luke

1. Prologue 1:1-4
2. Announcement of John's birth 1:5-25
3. Announcement of Jesus' birth 1:26-38
4. Mary's visit to Elizabeth 1:39-56
5. John's birth 1:57-80
6. Jesus' birth 2:1-21
7. Jesus' presentation in the temple 2:22-40
8. Jesus' visit to the temple

#### John

1. 1. Prologue: The divine Word and creation 1:1-5
2. Prologue: John's witness to the Word in creation 1:6-8
3. Prologue: Reactions to the Word in creation 1:9-13
4. Prologue: The Word and the community of believers 1:14

Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
8. Slaying of children in Bethlehem 2:6-18		2:41-52	5. Prologue: John's witness to the Word in the community of believers 1:15
9. Return from Egypt 2:19-23		<b>9. Beginning of John's ministry 3:1-6</b>	6. Prologue: Reaction to the Word in the community of believers 1:16-18
<b>10. John the Baptizer 3:1-12</b>		<b>10. John's preaching of repentance 3:7-9</b>	<b>7. The witness of John the Baptist 1:19-28</b>
11. The Baptist of Jesus 3:13-17		<b>11. John's ethical instruction 3:10-14</b>	8. The Lamb of God 1:29-34
		<b>12. John's preaching of the Messiah 3:15-17</b>	9. The first disciples 1:35-51
		<b>13. John's imprisonment 3:18-20</b>	
		14. Jesus' baptism 3:21-22	

Mark begins his story of Jesus with John as the introduction to that story. Matthew and Luke both include infancy stories about the birth of Jesus (and for Luke, John also) before introducing John. The fourth gospel uses John to launch the story of Jesus after the formal Prologue which lays out the theological framework for telling the story of Jesus. The one common element among all four is that the story of John introduces the public ministry of Jesus and thus sets the backdrop for the telling of that story of Jesus.

## II. Message

The Matthean passage naturally breaks down into two natural literary units: (1) General Depiction of Ministry, vv. 1-6, and (2) Detailed Preaching Sample, vv. 7-12.

### a. Ministry, vv. 1-6

#### Mt. 3:1-6, NRSV

1 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."<sup>F22</sup> 3 This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." " 4 Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, 6 and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

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Footnotes:  
F22: Or [is at hand]

#### Mk. 1:1-6, NRSV

1 The beginning of the good news<sup>F1</sup> of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.<sup>F2</sup> 2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,<sup>F3</sup> "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,<sup>F4</sup> who will prepare your way; 3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight," " 4 John the baptizer appeared<sup>F5</sup> in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

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Footnotes:  
F1: Or [gospel]  
F2: Other ancient authorities lack [the Son of God]  
F3: Other ancient authorities read [in the prophets]  
F4: Gk [before your face]  
F5: Other ancient authorities read [John was

#### Lk. 3:1-6, NRSV

1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler<sup>F23</sup> of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler<sup>F24</sup> of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler<sup>F25</sup> of Abilene, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." "

## GNT

3:1 Ἐν δὲ ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκεῖναις παραγίνεται Ἰωάννης ὁ βαπτιστὴς κηρύσσων ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ τῆς Ἰουδαίας 3:2 [καὶ] λέγων, Μετανοεῖτε· ἤγγικεν γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν. 3:3 οὗτος γὰρ ἐστὶν ὁ ρηθεὶς διὰ Ἡσαΐου τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος, Φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ· Ἐτοιμάσατε τὴν ὁδὸν κυρίου, εὐθείας ποιεῖτε τὰς τρίβους αὐτοῦ. 3:4 Αὐτὸς δὲ ὁ Ἰωάννης εἶχεν τὸ ἔνδυμα αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τριχῶν καμήλου καὶ ζώνην δερματίνην περὶ τὴν ὀσφὺν αὐτοῦ, ἡ δὲ τροφή ἦν αὐτοῦ ἀκρίδες καὶ μέλι ἄγριον. 3:5 τότε ἐξεπορεύετο πρὸς αὐτὸν Ἱεροσόλυμα καὶ πᾶσα ἡ Ἰουδαία καὶ πᾶσα ἡ περίχωρος τοῦ Ἰορδάνου, 3:6 καὶ ἐβαπτίζοντο ἐν τῷ Ἰορδάνῳ ποταμῷ ὑπ' αὐτοῦ ἐξομολογούμενοι τὰς ἀμαρτίας αὐτῶν.

## GNT

1:1 Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ [υἱοῦ θεοῦ].

1:2 Καθὼς γέγραπται ἐν τῷ Ἡσαΐα τῷ προφήτῃ,

*Ἴδου ἀποστέλλω τὸν ἄγγελόν μου πρὸ προσώπου σου,*

*ὃς κατασκευάσει τὴν ὁδὸν σου·*

1:3 *φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ,*

*Ἐτοιμάσατε τὴν ὁδὸν κυρίου, εὐθείας ποιεῖτε τὰς τρίβους αὐτοῦ,*

1:4 ἐγένετο Ἰωάννης [ὁ] βαπτίζων ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ καὶ κηρύσσων βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἀμαρτιῶν. 1:5 καὶ ἐξεπορεύετο πρὸς αὐτὸν πᾶσα ἡ Ἰουδαία χώρα καὶ οἱ Ἱεροσολυμίται πάντες, καὶ ἐβαπτίζοντο ὑπ' αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ Ἰορδάνῳ ποταμῷ ἐξομολογούμενοι τὰς ἀμαρτίας αὐτῶν. 1:6 καὶ ἦν ὁ Ἰωάννης ἐνδεδυμένος τρίχας καμήλου καὶ ζώνην δερματίνην περὶ τὴν ὀσφὺν αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἐσθίων ἀκρίδας καὶ μέλι ἄγριον.

1:6 καὶ ἦν ὁ Ἰωάννης ἐνδεδυμένος τρίχας καμήλου καὶ ζώνην δερματίνην περὶ τὴν ὀσφὺν αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἐσθίων ἀκρίδας καὶ μέλι ἄγριον.

## GNT

3:1 Ἐν ἔτει δὲ πεντεκαιδεκάτῳ τῆς ἡγεμονίας Τιβερίου Καίσαρος, ἡγεμονεύοντος Ποντίου Πιλάτου τῆς Ἰουδαίας, καὶ τετραρχοῦντος τῆς Γαλιλαίας Ἡρώδου, Φιλίππου δὲ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ αὐτοῦ τετραρχοῦντος τῆς Ἰουραίας καὶ Τραχωνίτιδος χώρας, καὶ Λυσανίου τῆς Ἀβιληνῆς τετραρχοῦντος, 3:2 ἐπὶ ἀρχιερέως Ἄννα καὶ Καϊάφα, ἐγένετο ρῆμα θεοῦ ἐπὶ Ἰωάννην τὸν Ζαχαρίου υἱὸν ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ. 3:3 καὶ ἦλθεν εἰς πᾶσαν [τὴν] περίχωρον τοῦ Ἰορδάνου κηρύσσων βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἀμαρτιῶν, 3:4 ὡς γέγραπται ἐν βίβλῳ λόγων Ἡσαΐου τοῦ προφήτου,

*Φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ,*

*Ἐτοιμάσατε τὴν ὁδὸν κυρίου,*

*εὐθείας ποιεῖτε τὰς τρίβους αὐτοῦ·*

3:5 *πᾶσα φάραγξ πληρωθήσεται καὶ πᾶν ὄρος καὶ βουνὸς ταπεινωθήσεται,*

*καὶ ἔσται τὰ σκολιὰ εἰς εὐθείαν καὶ αἱ τραχεῖαι εἰς ὁδοὺς λείας·*

3:6 *καὶ ὄψεται πᾶσα σὰρξ τὸ σωτήριον τοῦ θεοῦ.*

## Notes:

This first segment provides a general description of the ministry of John including his essential message, dress, and response to his ministry.

The essence of John's preaching is couched in a pointed statement: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (3:2, NRSV; Μετανοεῖτε· ἤγγικεν γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν). John called for the people to repent. The idea is that of a complete transformation in thinking about the way one lives his life. The nature of the Greek verb, a present imperative of command, is to call for this transformation as an ongoing process, rather than just as a one time instance. The basis of the challenge is given as the "nearness" of the Kingdom of Heaven. Again, as is reflected in the NRSV translation and marginal reading, the idea of the Greek verb, ἤγγικεν (engiken), is either temporal closeness ("is at hand") or spatial closeness ("has come near"). In either sense of the term, John's message was stressing that God's rule was identified with Jesus who was present both temporally and spatially. For Matthew the theme "Kingdom of Heaven" is going to become a major idea for his story of Jesus, with [some 31 uses](#) of the phrase. It means for Matthew what the term [Kingdom of God](#) means in Mark and Luke, as Howard Clark Kee ("The Gospel according to Matthew," *The Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible*, iPreach) notes: "The term 'kingdom of heaven' (lit. 'kingdom of the heavens') is used here as by pious Jews to mean 'the kingdom of God,' since it was considered irreverent to pronounce God's name directly."

The discourse section at the end of [Book One](#) in Matthew's story, The Sermon on the Mount (chaps 5-7), define in detail what is meant by the term. As Richard Gardner ("Matthew," *The Believer's Bible Church*

*Commentary, iPreach*) notes, “It is noteworthy that the First Gospel is the only one to suggest that John preached about the kingdom, and that Matthew summarizes Jesus’ message in 4:17 with exactly the same words we find here. As noted earlier, Matthew wants the reader to see John and Jesus as allies in a common cause, joint heralds of the imminent reign of God which makes repentance so urgent.”

This message of John is grounded in an Old Testament quote from **Isaiah 40:3**:

1 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

**3 A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.** 4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. 5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." 6 A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

Matthew uses only a small portion of the Isaiah passage, while Luke uses more of it. Mark, interestingly, combines Mal. 3:1 (Mk 1:2) with Isaiah 40:3 (Mk 1:3). The reason for using this passage is clear, as Gardner further notes: “Lest anyone miss the point, Matthew cites Isaiah 40:3 (as punctuated in the LXX), affirming that John the Baptist is the one crying out in the wilderness who starts things rolling. We should also keep in mind that the prophet Elijah is associated with the wilderness (1 Kings 19:4ff.)” John is seen in the role of an Elijah getting the people ready for the coming of the promised Anointed One from God. In fact, his dress and diet further point to Elijah, as Howard Kee (“The Gospel according to Matthew,” *The Interpreter’s One Volume Commentary on the Bible, iPreach*) observes: “The garb of John is reminiscent of the prophet Elijah, with whom John is directly identified by Matt. (17:14; cf. Mark 9:13; see also on Mark 1:6), although John’s message more nearly resembles that of the later prophets, Zechariah or Daniel. His strange diet of locusts and wild honey is an indication of the ascetic life he lived.”

Large numbers of people responded to John’s preaching; they came from the Roman province of Judea, the city of Jerusalem and the Jordan River valley where John was preaching. They were “confessing their sins” and receiving baptism as an expression of repentance. Richard Gardner (“Matthew,” *The Believer’s Bible Church Commentary, iPreach*) provides a helpful summation:

According to verse 6, John baptized those who responded to his preaching (hence his nickname, the Baptist). This washing in the Jordan was a symbolic action, confirming one’s desire to turn away from sin, and in some way preparing one for the endtime baptism of judgment (cf. vv. 11-12). The Essenes at Qumran also practiced a rite of washing; those willing to submit to all the precepts of God were “sprinkled with purifying water and sanctified by cleansing water” (1QS 3:8-9). Whereas the rite at Qumran was frequently repeated, however, baptism by John was apparently a one-time event.

In his description of John’s baptism, Matthew departs from Mark 1:4 in one important respect: Mark tells us that John’s baptism of repentance was “for the forgiveness of sins” (cf. Luke 3:3). Since only Jesus can truly forgive sin, however, Matthew deletes the words about forgiveness from the description of John’s rite and inserts them later on in a saying of Jesus about his death (cf. Matthew 26:28)!

Many possible connections come to mind in seeking to apply these verses to our world. First, the core message of John is still relevant; our world needs to repent as urgently as did John’s world. And for the same reason: the nearness of God’s rule in Christ Jesus. He is the entrance into God’s kingdom still. Second, our message needs to stir excitement about God in the hearts and minds of people. John caught the people’s attention, not because of a weird life-style, but because his life-style reinforced his message in a positive manner. His calling was to be a forerunner to the Messiah, and he became just that. For Matthew he was the “paper-clip” holding the Old and New Testaments together. Thirdly, John’s message was grounded in scripture. Ours needs that same sure foundation today. Finally, people still need to confess sin and demonstrate it in concrete actions. Baptism is a good beginning.

### **b. Preaching, vv. 7-12**

#### **Mt. 3:1-12, NRSV**

7 But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees com-

#### **Mk. 1:7-8, NRSV**

7 He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming

#### **Lk. 3:7-20, NRSV**

7 John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him,

ing for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9 Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 "I baptize you with<sup>F23</sup> water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with<sup>F24</sup> the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Footnotes:  
F23: Or [in]  
F24: Or [in]

#### GNT

<3:7> Ἰδὼν δὲ πολλοὺς τῶν Φαρισαίων καὶ Σαδδουκαίων ἐρχομένους ἐπὶ τὸ βάπτισμα αὐτοῦ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς, Γεννήματα ἐχιδνῶν, τίς ὑπέδειξεν ὑμῖν φυγεῖν ἀπὸ τῆς μελλούσης ὀργῆς; <3:8> ποιήσατε οὖν καρπὸν ἄξιον τῆς μετανοίας <3:9> καὶ μὴ δόξητε λέγειν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς, Πατέρα ἔχομεν τὸν Ἀβραάμ. λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν ὅτι δύναται ὁ θεὸς ἐκ τῶν λίθων τούτων ἐγεῖραι τέκνα τῷ Ἀβραάμ. <3:10> ἤδη δὲ ἡ ἀξίνη πρὸς τὴν ρίζαν τῶν δένδρων κεῖται· πᾶν οὖν δένδρον μὴ ποιοῦν καρπὸν καλὸν ἐκκόπτεται καὶ εἰς πῦρ βάλλεται. <3:11> ἐγὼ μὲν ὑμᾶς βαπτίζω ἐν ὕδατι εἰς μετάνοιαν, ὁ δὲ ὀπίσω μου ἐρχόμενος ἰσχυρότερός μου ἐστίν, οὗ οὐκ εἰμὶ ἰκανὸς τὰ ὑποδήματα βαστάσαι· αὐτὸς ὑμᾶς βαπτίσει ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ καὶ πυρὶ· <3:12> οὗ

after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with<sup>F6</sup> water; but he will baptize you with<sup>F7</sup> the Holy Spirit."

Footnotes:  
F6: Or [in]  
F7: Or [in]

#### GNT

<1:7> καὶ ἐκήρυσσεν λέγων, Ἔρχεται ὁ ἰσχυρότερός μου ὀπίσω μου, οὗ οὐκ εἰμὶ ἰκανὸς κύψας λῦσαι τὸν ἱμάντα τῶν ὑποδημάτων αὐτοῦ. <1:8> ἐγὼ ἐβάπτισα ὑμᾶς ὕδατι, αὐτὸς δὲ βαπτίσει ὑμᾶς ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ.

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 9 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." 10 And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" 11 In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." 12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" 13 He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." 14 Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,<sup>F26</sup> 16 John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with<sup>F27</sup> the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." 18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. 19 But Herod the ruler,<sup>F28</sup> who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that

τὸ πτύον ἐν τῇ χειρὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ διακαθαριεῖ τὴν ἄλωνα αὐτοῦ καὶ συναΐξει τὸν σῖτον αὐτοῦ εἰς τὴν ἀποθήκην, τὸ δὲ ἄχυρον κατακαύσει πυρὶ ἀσβέστω.

Herod had done, 20 added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

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Footnotes:  
F26: Or [the Christ]  
F27: Or [in]  
F28: Gk [tetrarch]

### Lk. 3:7-20, GNT

3:7 Ἔλεγεν οὖν τοῖς ἐκπορευομένοις ὄχλοις βαπτισθῆναι ὑπ' αὐτοῦ, Γεννήματα ἐχιδνῶν, τίς ὑπέδειξεν ὑμῖν φυγεῖν ἀπὸ τῆς μελλούσης ὀργῆς; 3:8 ποιήσατε οὖν καρποὺς ἀξίους τῆς μετανοίας καὶ μὴ ἄρξησθε λέγειν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς, Πατέρα ἔχομεν τὸν Ἀβραάμ. λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν ὅτι δύναται ὁ θεὸς ἐκ τῶν λίθων τούτων ἐγεῖραι τέκνα τῷ Ἀβραάμ. 3:9 ἤδη δὲ καὶ ἡ ἀξίνη πρὸς τὴν ρίζαν τῶν δένδρων κεῖται· πᾶν οὖν δένδρον μὴ ποιοῦν καρπὸν καλὸν ἐκκόπτεται καὶ εἰς πῦρ βάλλεται. 3:10 Καὶ ἐπηρώτων αὐτὸν οἱ ὄχλοι λέγοντες, Τί οὖν ποιήσωμεν; 3:11 ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ἔλεγεν αὐτοῖς, Ὁ ἔχων δύο χιτῶνας μεταδότω τῷ μὴ ἔχοντι, καὶ ὁ ἔχων βρώματα ὁμοίως ποιείτω. 3:12 ἦλθον δὲ καὶ τελῶναι βαπτισθῆναι καὶ εἶπαν πρὸς αὐτόν, Διδάσκαλε, τί ποιήσωμεν; 3:13 ὁ δὲ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτούς, Μηδὲν πλέον παρὰ τὸ διατεταγμένον ὑμῖν πράσσετε. 3:14 ἐπηρώτων δὲ αὐτόν καὶ στρατευόμενοι λέγοντες, Τί ποιήσωμεν καὶ ἡμεῖς; καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς, Μηδένα διασεῖσητε μηδὲ συκοφαντήσητε καὶ ἀρκεῖσθε τοῖς ὄψωνιοῖς ὑμῶν.

3:15 Προσδοκῶντος δὲ τοῦ λαοῦ καὶ διαλογοζομένων πάντων ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν περὶ τοῦ Ἰωάννου, μήποτε αὐτὸς εἴη ὁ Χριστός, 3:16 ἀπεκρίνατο λέγων πᾶσιν ὁ Ἰωάννης, Ἐγὼ μὲν ὕδατι βαπτίζω ὑμᾶς· ἔρχεται δὲ ὁ ἰσχυρότερός μου, οὗ οὐκ εἰμὶ ἰκανὸς λῦσαι τὸν ἱμάντα τῶν ὑποδημάτων αὐτοῦ· αὐτὸς ὑμᾶς βαπτίσει ἐν πνεύματι ἀγίῳ καὶ πυρὶ· 3:17 οὗ τὸ πτύον ἐν τῇ χειρὶ αὐτοῦ διακαθαῖραι τὴν ἄλωνα αὐτοῦ καὶ συναγαγεῖν τὸν σῖτον εἰς τὴν ἀποθήκην αὐτοῦ, τὸ δὲ ἄχυρον κατακαύσει πυρὶ ἀσβέστω. 3:18 Πολλὰ μὲν οὖν καὶ ἕτερα παρακαλῶν εὐηγγελίζετο τὸν λαόν. 3:19 ὁ δὲ Ἡρώδης ὁ τετραάρχης, ἐλεγχόμενος ὑπ' αὐτοῦ περὶ Ἡρωδιάδος τῆς γυναικὸς τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ αὐτοῦ καὶ περὶ πάντων ὧν ἐποίησεν πονηρῶν ὁ Ἡρώδης, 3:20 προσέθηκεν καὶ τοῦτο ἐπὶ πᾶσιν [καὶ] κατέκλεισεν τὸν Ἰωάννην ἐν φυλακῇ.

### Notes:

At this point in the gospel writers' stories about John, each one goes a distinctive direction, governed by their own objectives. Matthew (3:7-10), with his Jewish oriented audience in mind, zeroes in on two Jewish leadership groups, the Pharisees and Sadducees, who had representatives coming out seeking baptism. The challenge to them is to be sincere. John evidently sensed a false motive behind their request for baptism, and he scorchingly denounced them and any special privilege they might claim to acceptability with God.

Mark doesn't focus on any specific group of people. Luke, however, takes a different approach. The strong language of Matthew is applied to the crowds of people in general, rather than just to the leadership groups as in Matthew. Then with the plea of the crowd as to what could they do to demonstrate repentance, he lists off several groups (Lk. 3:10-14) including tax collectors and soldiers.

The second part of Matthew's emphasis, vv. 11-12, stresses John's relationship with Jesus in terms of humility and inferiority to Jesus. This picked up the earlier written Markan emphasis in Mk 1:7. Luke (3:15-20) also picks up on this theme with more elaboration. John baptized with water; the Messiah will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Thus the Messiah is so much greater than John that he feels unworthy to perform even a slave's task of carrying his sandals. The NLT picks up on the meaning here well with its rendering: "I am not even worthy to be his slave." Also John's message, in Matthew, stresses that the Messiah's coming will mean divine judgment in dramatic fashion.

Connections? Several are here. Repentance, for it to be real, must lead to concrete actions of obedience to God. It can't be reduced to ritual or show for PR purposes. We need a proper attitude of humility toward our Lord and his greatness. John had it; we need it. We must never lose sight of the judgment aspect of Jesus' coming. It was a part of his first coming and will be a major part of his second coming.



Mt. 3:1-12, GNT

3:1

δὲ

Ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκεῖναις

1 **παραγίνεται Ἰωάννης ὁ βαπτιστής**

κηρύσσων

ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ τῆς Ἰουδαίας

3:2

καὶ

λέγων,

A

**Μετανοεῖτε·**

γὰρ

B

**ἤγγικεν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.**

3:3

γὰρ

Γ

**οὗτος ἐστὶν ὁ ῥηθεὶς**

διὰ Ἡσαΐου τοῦ προφήτου

/-----|

λέγοντος,

Φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ·

Ἐτοιμάσατε τὴν ὁδὸν κυρίου,

εὐθείας ποιεῖτε τὰς τρίβους αὐτοῦ.

3:4

δὲ

2 **Αὐτὸς ὁ Ἰωάννης εἶχεν τὸ ἔνδυμα αὐτοῦ**

ἀπὸ τριχῶν καμήλου

καὶ

**ζώνην δερματίνην**

περὶ τὴν ὀσφὺν αὐτοῦ,

δὲ

3 **ἡ τροφή ἦν αὐτοῦ ἀκρίδες**

καὶ

**μέλι ἄγριον.**

3:5

τότε

4 **ἐξεπορεύετο... Ἱεροσόλυμα**

πρὸς αὐτὸν

καὶ

**πᾶσα ἡ Ἰουδαία**

καὶ

**πᾶσα ἡ περίχωρος τοῦ Ἰορδάνου,**

3:6

καὶ

5 **ἐβαπτίζοντο**

ἐν τῷ Ἰορδάνῳ ποταμῷ

ὑπ' αὐτοῦ

ἐξομολογούμενοι τὰς ἁμαρτίας αὐτῶν.

3:7

δὲ

Ἰδὼν πολλοὺς τῶν Φαρισαίων καὶ Σαδδουκαίων

ἐρχομένους ἐπὶ τὸ βάπτισμα αὐτοῦ

6 **εἶπεν αὐτοῖς,**

Γεννήματα ἐχιδνῶν,

Δ

**τίς ὑπέδειξεν ὑμῖν φυγεῖν**

ἀπὸ τῆς μελλούσης ὀργῆς;

3:8

οὐκ

E  
3:9  
Z  
H  
3:10  
Θ  
I  
K  
3:11  
Λ  
M  
N  
Ξ  
O  
3:12  
Π  
Ρ  
Σ

*ποιήσατε καρπὸν*  
ἄξιον τῆς μετανοίας  
καὶ  
*μὴ δόξητε λέγειν*  
ἐν ἑαυτοῖς,  
Πατέρα ἔχομεν τὸν Ἀβραάμ.  
γὰρ  
*λέγω ὑμῖν*  
ὅτι δύναται ὁ θεὸς...ἐγεῖραι τέκνα  
ἐκ τῶν λίθων τούτων  
τῷ Ἀβραάμ.  
δὲ  
ἤδη  
*ἡ ἀξίνη πρὸς τὴν ρίζαν τῶν δένδρων κεῖται·*  
οὖν  
μὴ ποιοῦν καρπὸν καλὸν  
*πᾶν δένδρον...ἐκκόπτεται*  
καὶ  
εἰς πῦρ  
*-----...βάλλεται.*  
μὲν  
*ἐγὼ ὑμᾶς βαπτίζω*  
ἐν ὕδατι  
εἰς μετάνοιαν,  
δὲ  
*ὁ ὀπίσω μου ἐρχόμενος*  
*ισχυρότερός μου ἐστίν,*  
*οὗ οὐκ εἰμὶ ἰκανὸς τὰ ὑποδήματα βαστάσαι·*  
*αὐτὸς ὑμᾶς βαπτίσει*  
ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ καὶ πυρί·  
*οὗ τὸ πύον -----*  
ἐν τῇ χειρὶ αὐτοῦ  
καὶ  
*διακαθαριεῖ τὴν ἄλωνα αὐτοῦ*  
καὶ  
*συνάξει τὸν σῖτον αὐτοῦ*  
εἰς τὴν ἀποθήκην,  
δὲ  
*τὸ ἄχυρον κατακαύσει*  
πυρὶ ἀσβέστῳ.