

# Ministry of Grace

## Matthew 3

<sup>1</sup>In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, <sup>2</sup>"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." <sup>3</sup>For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'"

<sup>4</sup>Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup>Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, <sup>6</sup>and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

<sup>7</sup>But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" <sup>8</sup>Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. <sup>9</sup>And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. <sup>10</sup>Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>11</sup>"I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup>His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

<sup>13</sup>Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup>John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" <sup>15</sup>But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. <sup>16</sup>And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; <sup>17</sup>and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

## Parallel Passages

### Mark 1:1-11

<sup>1</sup>The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. <sup>2</sup>As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, <sup>3</sup>the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" <sup>4</sup>John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

<sup>5</sup>And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

<sup>9</sup>In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

## Luke 3:1-22

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

<sup>7</sup>He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup>Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. <sup>9</sup>Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

<sup>10</sup>And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" <sup>11</sup>And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise."

<sup>12</sup>Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?"

<sup>13</sup>And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do."

<sup>14</sup>Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages."

<sup>15</sup>As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, <sup>16</sup>John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. <sup>17</sup>His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." <sup>18</sup>So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.

<sup>19</sup>But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, <sup>20</sup>added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.

<sup>21</sup>Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, <sup>22</sup>and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

# Notes

## Matthew 3:1, 2

<sup>1</sup>In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, <sup>2</sup>"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

“**John the Baptist**” – Or John the Baptizer. He got that name because his ministry consisted of preaching repentance and baptizing those who repented. It was common then to baptize Gentiles as they accepted the tenets of Judaism. So, we see that John was treating the Israelites like Gentiles.

“**wilderness of Judea**” – Some translations have “desert.” The Greek word is *erēmos*, meaning “desolate place,” “deserted place,” or “lonely place.” The place is most likely in the Jordan valley which is sparsely inhabited and desolate.

“**kingdom of heaven**” – Kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God are used interchangeably in the Bible. In the gospels, only Matthew uses the expression “kingdom of heaven.” All the other gospel writers call it “the kingdom of God.” Daniel makes it clear in **Daniel 4:26** that God’s rule is intended in the expression of “heaven’s rule.”

that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that **the Most High rules** the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will. And as it was commanded to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be confirmed for you from the time that you know that **Heaven rules**. (**Daniel 4:25-26**)

In this passage from Daniel it can be seen that “the Most High rules” and “Heaven rules” are in a parallel arrangement, thus equating the two. Likewise, we can deduce from the use of “the kingdom of heaven” by Matthew and parallel uses of “the kingdom of God” that the two expressions are equal. However, we need to be very careful about the use of either of these terms, because there appear to be four aspects of the “kingdom of heaven” or the “kingdom of God.” Notice that in each case it is a reference to **the domain where God rules**. These four are:

1. **The entire created order** – God has created all that is and, in reality, He is ruler over all. His rule is not just over those who acknowledge Him, but those who reject Him as well. Though this is truly His kingdom, it is never referred to as such in the Bible. The period before the destruction of the current heaven and earth is sometimes referred to as “the kingdom of men” as Daniel has done above.
2. **The kingdom over which Jesus, the Christ rules**. This includes the church age, the Millennial Kingdom, and the Eternal Kingdom. Jesus (God) rules in the hearts and minds of those who submit to Him. Thus, we see that this is a spiritual kingdom.
3. **The kingdom over which Jesus will rule physically**. This is the Millennial Kingdom which will commence after the Tribulation and will end when the current heavens and earth are destroyed.
4. **The kingdom which will never end**. After the Millennial Kingdom, when all people have been judged, there will be an Eternal Kingdom which will occupy the new heavens and the new earth. Only those who have believed God’s message and have submitted to Him during their earthly life will be present in the Eternal Kingdom. All those who have rejected God’s message throughout the ages will be separated from the Eternal Kingdom, being incarcerated in the lake of fire where they will suffer eternal torment.

**“Repent”** –the Greek word is *metanoēō*, which is made up of *meta*, meaning “a change of condition or location” and *noeō*, meaning “to exercise the mind” or “to think.” Hence, *metanoēō* refers to a change in the way a person thinks. In this case it referred to a change in the way the Jewish people thought about their sins. Repentance, like salvation, involves an act of the mind and will but it is verified by the deeds one does afterward.

Although the notion of the kingdom of heaven was not new to the Jews, the idea that one had to repent to enter into it was new. The Jews of the time believed that they were guaranteed entrance into the kingdom of heaven because of their position as the sons of Abraham. However, the devout Jews of that day (such as the Pharisees) believed that they were the only ones guaranteed entrance into the kingdom of heaven because of the righteousness that they had earned by obeying the Law.

**“kingdom of heaven is at hand”** – What, exactly, did John mean by this expression. If we refer to the four-fold aspect of the kingdom of heaven described above, we see that the kingdom over which Jesus rules (the second one described above) is what he means. This includes the Church Age, the Millennium, and the New Heavens and New Earth. The Jews were expecting the Millennial Kingdom, in which the Messiah rules physically, but that kingdom was not at hand except in the person of the King who will one day rule in that kingdom.

### **Matthew 3:3, 4**

**<sup>3</sup>For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'" <sup>4</sup>Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.**

**“he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah”** – This is a reference to Isaiah’s prophecy in the opening of the fortieth chapter of his writing:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 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. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." (**Isaiah 40:1-5**)

This is one of the most classic prophecies in the entire Bible regarding the Millennial Kingdom. It is proclaiming to the children of Israel a time when their Messiah will rule. It is also the prophecy of John the Baptist. He is the “voice,” but he is not the “Word.” He is not the message, simply the proclaimer of the coming message.

As the Lord and His disciples were coming down from the mount of transfiguration, they asked Him questions about the coming of the Messiah:

And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead." And the disciples asked him, "Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" He answered, "Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist. (**Matthew 17:9-13**)

Jesus was telling His disciples of the duality of the prophecies regarding the coming of the Messiah and His Kingdom. He told them that Elijah is coming first, that is, before the second coming of Christ Elijah will come. He is possibly one of the two “witnesses” spoken of in **Revelation 11:3**. Jesus then went on to tell His disciples that Elijah had already come and the disciples understood that He was referring to John the Baptist. In other words, John the Baptist is a “type” of Elijah. John proclaimed the coming of the Messiah, but the Jews rejected Him. Elijah will likewise proclaim the coming of the Messiah to usher in the Millennial Kingdom.

**“wore a garment of camel's hair”** – This is not the soft camel’s hair from the underbelly that we find today in fine clothing. It is the long, coarse hair that has been woven into a burlap type of coarse fabric. It was common for the poorest people to wear this clothing because of its low cost.

**“his food was locusts”** – to us it may seem strange to eat locusts. However, throughout the Middle East, the poorest people will eat them because they are rich in protein and they can be gathered easily at times. But it is also true that the rich consider them a delicacy and will pay a high price for them. The fact that John the Baptist wore camel’s hair and ate locusts indicates that he was extremely poor.

### **Matthew 3:5, 6**

**<sup>5</sup>Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, <sup>6</sup>and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.**

One might wonder why the preaching of repentance and baptizing of Jews, which was completely counter to the messages being delivered by the Pharisees, would have attracted such large crowds. We have to keep in mind, however, that the Jews of that time were expecting the Messiah to come at any time. Those who had studied the prophecies of Daniel could calculate with reasonable certainty that the Messiah was due to come soon. As a result, John’s message of the coming kingdom would have struck a chord of anticipation with all people. Even Luke attests to this fact in his gospel account of the ministry of Jesus:

Now as they heard these things, He spoke another parable, because He was near Jerusalem and because they thought the kingdom of God would appear immediately. (**Luke 19:11**)

**“and they were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins”** – Obviously, the people not only were anticipating the Messiah, they were well aware of their own sinfulness. This seems to be a common characteristic of any revival; it is necessary to see one’s own need before seeking spiritual help. Because of his message and the expectation of the soon arrival of the Messiah, many of the people wondered whether or not John was the Messiah:

As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, (**Luke 3:15**)

### **Matthew 3:7**

**<sup>7</sup>But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"**

**“Pharisees and Sadducees”** – These were two of the three primary sects of Judaism in Jesus’ day. The third was the sect of the Essenes, who preferred a life of solitude, separated from the general populous. Because of this habit of solitude, they were never around Jesus and His disciples which is why they are never mentioned in the gospel accounts contained in the New Testament.

The word Pharisee is derived from *pharatz*, meaning “to separate or to divide.” They were called this because they separated themselves as “righteous” people from the common, unrighteous people. The Pharisees held to the “oral traditions of the elders” as more important than the written scripture,

believing in both fate (the sovereignty of God) and the free will of man. They put their stock in the ceremonies and the political power of their religion. They saw themselves as being the righteous teachers of the Law and as examples to all the people. Their actions, however, showed them to be the worst of sinners, being quick to see the speck in someone else's eye without seeing the log in their own. They were the right wing ultra-conservatives of their day.

The Sadducees, on the other hand, represented the liberal-left of the Jewish faith. They got their name from Sadok, a disciple of Antigonus Sochaeus, president of the Sanhedrin some 250 years before the time of Christ. Sadok misunderstood one of the primary teachings of Antigonus which was:

Do not be as servants who serve their master for the sake of reward; but be ye as servants that do not serve their master for the sake of reward, and let the fear of God be upon you.

Sadok thought this to mean that there was no life after death because there was no future state of rewards or punishments. The Sadducees denied the existence of spirits as well as the resurrection and any future state after death. Unlike the Pharisees, they rejected the traditions of the elders and denied fate (the sovereignty of God). Instead, they ascribed all to the free will of man. It has been said that they were barely more than simple deists.

Neither the Pharisees nor the Sadducees perceived a need to repent, because they felt that they had already "arrived." That is, they believed themselves to be righteous. As a result, John expressed surprise that they would come to experience his teaching about repentance. Luke makes it clear that the Pharisees rejected John's message that all men needed to repent and be baptized:

(When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.) **(Luke 7:29-30)**

**"Brood of vipers!"** – This is an appropriate name for both Pharisees and Sadducees. The Greek word *echidna* refers not just to snakes in general but specifically to the viper. The viper is a beautifully decorated snake whose poison is extremely deadly. On the outside it has a beautiful appearance, but on the inside is death. They are full of deception and willing to inflict their harm on all who would come close. Rather than being of the seed of Abraham as they claimed, the Pharisees and Sadducees were the seed of that old serpent, Satan.

**"Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"** – This was a subtle way for John to reveal their true motives to them. Since the Pharisees believed themselves to be righteous and the Sadducees did not believe in an afterlife, neither sect had any fear of the wrath to come. And since neither sect listened to anyone except the leaders of their own sect, there was no warning from anyone that they would listen to. Although the wrath that John is talking about may be the wrath of God which they will suffer at the judgment of the last day, there is another wrath that was far closer at hand from which both sects would suffer. Around AD 70, barely more than forty years after John's ministry, the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, slaughtering all the Jews they could find. However, the Christians at the time of the Roman invasion of Jerusalem, believing this to be the fulfillment of Christ's prophecy (**Matthew 24:15-18**), fled the city before the Romans got there and escaped slaughter by the Romans.

### **Matthew 3:8, 9**

**<sup>8</sup>Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. <sup>9</sup>And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.**

**"fruit"** –The fruit that John is talking about refers to the actions that are the result of repentance. It is easy to claim repentance, but only true repentance will produce the deeds that result from it.

**“We have Abraham as our father.”** – Most devout Jews believed that simply being a descendant of Abraham guaranteed them God’s blessing. This was especially true of the Pharisees and Sadducees who considered themselves full-blooded Jews as opposed to the Samaritan Jews who were considered to be half-breeds.

**“God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.”** – This should not be too hard to believe, since God was able to make Adam from the dirt of the earth. It would not be any more difficult for Him to raise up living souls from the rocks. We also learn from the book of Romans that the true children of Abraham are those who believe in God’s promises (**Romans 4:16**), not those who are his physical descendants.

### **Matthew 3:10 – 12**

**<sup>10</sup>Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>11</sup>“I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup>His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”**

**“the ax is laid to the root of the trees”** – Or, “the axe is laid **at** the root of the trees.” In other words, the axe is in a position where it is about to be drawn back and brought forth with power to execute judgment.

**“Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”** – This is a clear image of the judgment at the end of time when those who have not received God’s message will be condemned to the lake of fire. In Luke’s gospel account we find that the people responded with questions of what to do:

And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise."  
**(Luke 3:10, 11)**

John here describes the actions that demonstrate repentance. This is really nothing more than the idea of loving your neighbor as yourself.

**“I baptize you with water”** – This could just as well have been translated as “I baptize you **in** water.” Although this is not proof that immersion is the form of baptism that John practiced, it appears that whatever form he practiced (immersion, pouring, or sprinkling), it was done while they were in the river Jordan. On the surface, from Matthew’s gospel it appears that John is making these comments to the Pharisees and Sadducees. However if we look at Mark’s gospel we see that he is making these comments to all who went out to him:

And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." **(Mark 1:5-8)**

John’s message is about the Messiah and His Kingdom. His sermons apparently began with a call to repentance and baptism then proceeded to a declaration of the Christ and the imminent setting-up of His Kingdom.

**“He who is coming after me”** – John is talking about Jesus, the Messiah. Remember that John was sent to announce the coming of the Christ. This is part of his message.

**“whose sandals I am not worthy to carry”** – The job of bringing a person his or her footwear and putting them away was the job of the lowest of servants. John was declaring himself to be unworthy of doing the basest job for the One who was coming after. He recognized that the Messiah was so holy and so worthy that compared to Him each one of us is worthless.

**“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”** – This reference to fire is believed by some to refer to the cloven tongues of fire sent by the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. However, if we look carefully at the context, the following verse is a clear statement of judgment by fire. Keep in mind that the message that John is delivering is a kingdom message. The kingdom and the King are what the people are waiting for, but John is warning them that the Messiah is coming to judge, not to bless. This judgment will be the result of their rejection of the very One whom they claim to be waiting for.

**“His winnowing fork is in his hand”** – The winnowing fan or shovel, was used to scoop up the wheat after it had been stripped from the stalk. With the winnowing fan the grain was thrown straight up in the air. The wind would then separate the wheat kernels from the chaff. The Chaff would be blown aside by the wind and the grain would fall straight down. This verse is clear evidence that the baptism of fire talked about in the previous verse is one of judgment because here he talks about gathering the wheat together into the barn but burning the chaff with fire. This is a picture of the judgment just before the Millennium commonly referred to as the sheep and goat judgment:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ...' Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. (**Matthew 25:31-34, 41**)

### **Matthew 3:13-15**

**<sup>13</sup>Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup>John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" <sup>15</sup>But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.**

**“Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John”** – This is a description of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Any prophet or priest of that time began his ministry at the age of thirty. The first requirement of the prophet was to be anointed and the first duty of the priest was to be washed. The baptism of Jesus represents both of these. Though He was already anointed by God, he will (in verse sixteen) receive the anointing of the Holy Spirit. By being baptized, he was undergoing the ceremonial washing as a priest which then prepared Him for the full responsibilities of the offices to which He had been called. Jesus was not baptized as a result of repentance like the others, since He had no sin to repent from. He was being baptized in preparation for ministry.

**“would have prevented him”** – From the Greek word *diakōluō*, which is made up of *dia*, meaning “through” but used here as an intensifier, and *kōluō*, meaning “to hinder.” So this word means that



John strongly resisted the notion of baptizing his Messiah. John clearly recognized his lowly position in the presence of His Lord.

**“to fulfill all righteousness”** – Baptism was not an ordinance required by the Law of Moses except as mentioned previously. Therefore, Jesus’ baptism was not an act of obedience, rather it was an act of humility and an act of identification. He had emptied Himself of His glory and had taken on human flesh, now it was necessary for Him to demonstrate that humility. The identification with humankind is also pictured here as a foreshadowing of his death and resurrection which would be done on behalf of all mankind.

### **Matthew 3:16, 17**

**<sup>16</sup>And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; <sup>17</sup>and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."**

**“immediately he went up from the water”** – Some claim that this verse says Jesus came up **out of** the water. However the word for “water” is a genitive form, meaning either “of “ or “from” and the preposition *ek*, meaning “out of” is **not** present. Instead the preposition *apo*, meaning “from” or “away from” is used. So the proper translation of this verse is “from the water.”

**“opened to Him”** – This could be interpreted as either opened to John or opened to Jesus.

**“He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove”** – Again, the “he” could be a reference to Jesus or to John. I rather think this to be John in this case because this was the sign that had been given to John. The simile “like a dove” can be interpreted either as “in the manner that a dove descends” or “in the form and appearance of a dove.” The latter is probably the proper interpretation because, according to Luke’s gospel, John says that the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form:

and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." (**Luke 3:22**)

**“a voice from heaven”** – The fact that an audible voice was heard is indisputable from the text. What is disputable, however, is whether all the people heard the voice or just John. If only John heard it, then he must have told his disciples about it who, in turn, told Christ’s disciples about it because Matthew, Mark, and Luke all document the event as having happened. It is more likely that everyone present heard the audible voice of God the Father proclaim these words just as all the Jews heard the voice of God proclaim the Law from Mt. Sinai (see Exodus chapter 20).

**“This is my beloved Son”** – Here we see all three persons of the Trinity at work; God the Father proclaiming the blessedness of God the Son and God the Holy Spirit anointing the Son.

# So What?

## John, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and everyone else.

Most of those who belonged to the Pharisees and the Sadducees believed themselves to be following the “true” religion. Many of them were very zealous with regard to their faith. Paul, a Pharisee before experiencing salvation on the road to Damascus, was devout and determined to rid the world of the infidels who followed Jesus. Here’s how he described it to his fellow Jews after he had been arrested in the temple:

"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished. (**Acts 22:3-5**)

But, as Paul later learned, the religion of the Pharisees was man-centered rather than God-centered. Those Pharisees and Sadducees who came out to see John the Baptist may or may not have been as zealous as Paul, but their faith was void just as his had been before he submitted to Jesus. They were only there to demonstrate to everyone else that they were devoutly religious. Their actions were not the result of deep convictions or repentance. Their actions were strictly for show. They were there to be seen, not to see. They claimed to be the sons of Abraham without true faith, just as many today claim to be Christians without submission to the Lord of heaven and earth. They truly believed that they were among God’s chosen ones; that they were about to experience God’s blessing and the presence of their Messiah. It’s true, they were about to behold their Messiah, Jesus, but they were going to reject Him because He didn’t fit their definition of what He was supposed to be like. Therefore, instead of welcoming their Messiah with words of praise, they were only a few years away from crucifying their redeemer.

How many Christians are there today going through all the motions, believing that doing and saying the right things will endear them to God? Too many of them are like the Pharisees and Sadducees, fighting among themselves, trying to prove they are right and everyone else wrong. They’re so focused on the form of their religion that they are blinded to the presence of their Lord. They are so focused on the letter that they deny the subject of their faith.

The common people who heard John’s message, however, were different. Many of them were experiencing true repentance and were being baptized. Lest we forget, however, these people were not becoming Christians. That could not happen until after the resurrection. These people were repenting of their sins and being baptized in anticipation of the coming of their Messiah. John’s gospel message was not that Jesus was going to die on the cross to pay for their sins. John was a Jew preaching a Jewish message to the Jewish people. He proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom, not salvation from their sins. The penitent people were not surrendering their will to God, they were preparing for the reign of peace that had been promised. Here’s how Isaiah described that kingdom:

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of

his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. (**Isaiah 11:1-9**)

We need to understand that Jesus' earthly ministry was to the Jews. He came to present Himself to His people as their Messiah, but they rejected Him. The message delivered to these people was not the same gospel we preach. This was NOT the beginning of the church. The church couldn't start until after the resurrection and really didn't start until the day of Pentecost, fifty days after the crucifixion. The gospel that John preached was the gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven, the Millennial Kingdom.

We will find throughout the study of the book of Matthew that Jesus' teaching was all kingdom teaching. He proclaimed truths for the Millennial Kingdom, not truths for the church. Yes, they are very similar. Yes, Christians can learn much from the truths of the Kingdom, but they are not Christian truths. As we go through this book we will see that this teaching is for Jews specifically, not Christians. We can't be saved by obeying the teaching of John the Baptist and we can't be saved by obeying the teaching of Jesus. Let me say it one more time. Jesus ministry was to the Jews. He was, and is, their living Messiah. He did not come to live as our Savior. He came to die as our Savior. Remember, salvation doesn't come as a result of obedience. Salvation, that is to say righteousness imputed by God, comes as a result of faith and faith alone. In the current church age that faith is in the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, the anointed one of God, who paid the penalty for our sins.

Now, before we close, let's look at John the Baptist for a few minutes. Remember, he was not a Baptist, he was *the baptist*, that is, the baptizer. John was specifically called by God to his ministry. He did not choose to serve God as a preacher of the coming Kingdom of Heaven, he was ordained to it. Possibly more than any other man, he submitted his will to the father. He rejected all the comforts of this world. He didn't pursue riches, he pursued righteousness. He didn't try to earn favor with God, he simply submitted to the will of God. He knew that he was a nobody. He even knew that he was disposable, for he told this to his own disciples:

John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized (for John had not yet been put in prison). Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness-- look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him." John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease." (**John 3:23-30**)

It is unclear whether John knew that he was going to die soon, but clearly he knew that his ministry was about to decrease dramatically while Jesus' ministry was about to grow just as dramatically. John didn't concern himself with that. He was singularly focused on the ministry that God had

called him to. His ministry was to proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven, to baptize those who had repented, and to point everyone to the Messiah.

You may not know what ministry God has called you to. You may be searching how He wants you to serve Him within the church. You may be waiting for God to make it clear. However, if you're not doing anything in the mean time, you'll never know what He wants. You need to become active. If nothing else, you need to be proclaiming the gospel message to anyone who will listen. That's the Great Commission, "Go into all the world preaching the good news, making disciples ..."

Take note, however, that John didn't go into the synagogue and preach to those who weren't ready to hear the message. He waited until they came to him. But when they did, he didn't hold back. He gave them the whole message and even pointed out that some of them were hypocrites. The Apostle Paul, on the other hand, did go into the synagogues and preach to those who weren't ready. He did so because that was the specific ministry that he had been called to. So, unless you know that is the type of ministry God has for you, I would suggest that you deliver the gospel message to all who come to you wanting to hear. But how will they come to you? And why?

There are many people who are seeking for the truth today in spite of, or because of, the hopeless message they are hearing from the world. And they are watching for someone who has the truth. If you are living your life submitted to God and committed to doing His will, then they will see you and they will want what you have. That's what John the baptizer did. He submitted his will to the will of the Father and when people came to him he preached to them.

Do you want to serve God? Listen to me! Do you want to serve God? Or do you want Him to serve you? Do you want to hear some day, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"? The only way that's going to happen is if you submit your will to His. Quit trying to do it your way and do it His way. Spend more time with Him by reading your Bible and praying. Listen to what He is telling you through His Word. Listen to what He is telling you through His Word. Listen to what He is telling you through His Word. Then put it into action! And proclaim the good news about salvation to anyone who asks you. As the Apostle Peter put it:

but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, (1 Peter 3:15)

If you don't live a life that is characterized by hope, no one will ask!

So, let me ask you a couple of probing questions. Are you devoutly religious, like the Pharisees and Sadducees? Are you living the way you do in order to demonstrate to those around you that you are a "religious" person? Or – are you living the way you do because you have repented of sinful ways and you are submitted to the Messiah, the Christ, as the Lord of your life?

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