

January 3, 2010/ Matthew 3 (ESV¹)

Mat 3:1 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,

John the Baptist came ... there has been no prophet for 400 years ... the Jews are acutely aware of this ... there has been a drought of hearing the Word of the LORD ... and John, the cousin of Jesus, comes on the scene preaching/thundering in the desert ...

Mat 3:2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

the first thing we hear from the lips of John the Baptist is "repent" ... Mark tells us that when Jesus began to preach, His message was the same ...

Mar 1:14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God,

Mar 1:15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

on the day of Pentecost, the first thing we hear from Peter on behalf of the newly baptized church is a call to repentance ...

Act 2:38 And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Act 2:39 For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."

Act 2:40 And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation."

this is the authentic Gospel, the Biblical Gospel ... it is not "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life" ... it is not "your best life now" ... it is not "find your purpose" ... it is "repent and be saved" ... "you are by birth and by choice at odds with the King of the Universe, repent and be saved!" ... Biblical repentance is much more than emotional sorrow over sin, unaccompanied by fundamental change ... it involves a thorough change of mind/heart and manifests itself in reformed behavior ... John is not asking for some temporary emotional reaction on the part of his hearers, he's demanding that they change their lives ... today our elites mock the notion of a Godly person pleading with people to turn around and go the other way ... many moderns who think themselves Christians are embarrassed by the preaching of repentance ... but it is what the prophets preached, it is what John is preaching, it's what Jesus preaches, and it's what the authentic Christian church preaches ...

John appeals to the people to repent because the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand ... that makes sense for at least two reasons ... for one, if the King and His rule and reign are near, it's completely suicidal and foolish to continue in rebellion against Him, in affront to His Kingship ... for another, the rabbis taught that repentance was so tied to God's plan and working, that if Israel could ever repent perfectly, even for only a

¹ Scripture taken from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. Copyright 2000; 2001, by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

single day, then Messiah would come ... so the people hear in John's call to repent a promise that doing so will speed the deliverance of Israel ...

Mat 3:3 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.'"

Matthew quotes from Isaiah 40 ... he sees in John the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah ... the picture is that of a King's herald letting the King's subjects in a remote part of the Kingdom know that He is coming ...

Isa 40:3 A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Isa 40:4 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.

Isa 40:5 And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

ancient roads were a mess ... the only ones that were paved in Isaiah's time and place were ones used by kings ... just as subjects in the remote areas of a kingdom might be wise to spruce things up for the visit of an earthly king, John is telling the Jews to all get ready for a visit from their heavenly King ...

Mat 3:4 Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

before the coming of Messiah, the Jews were expecting the literal return of Elijah ... this expectation was based on their understanding of **Malachi 4:5**

Mal 4:5 "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.

John looked the part of Elijah ... his attire was straight out of Elijah's closet ...

2Ki 1:8 They answered him, "He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist." And he said, "It is Elijah the Tishbite."

John's food was odd too ... it was hardly something served in the best restaurants ... instead, it was food for a rough outdoorsman, one accustomed to no real comforts in life ... this is a guy called and prepared by God, preaching repentance, with no regard for safety or comfort ... he's not writing best-selling books or getting invitations to the halls of power ... he's preaching repentance to a people who need to hear his message ...

Mat 3:5 Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him,

Mat 3:6 and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

there is more here than might first meet the eye ... while we don't blink at the thought of John baptizing in the Jordan, the Jews practiced baptism only for pagan converts ... in their popular thinking, no Jew needed baptizing!! ... a Jew was, after all, the offspring of Abraham ... in their thinking, Abraham was unique ... so unique in his goodness and favor with God, that he had built up a treasury of merit that was sufficient not

only for himself, but for all his descendants as well ... all Jews, so the popular belief went, were safe from final judgment, just because they were Jews ... what is then remarkable here is that at least some of these folks have been shaken out of this foolish presumption, to face their guilt before God and to repent ... to be baptized as a sign of that repentance, just like guilty pagans like you and me ... it is significant that part of the repentance acted out here is confession ... these people have admitted publicly that they are wrong ... that they are sinners in need to the mercy and forgiveness of God ...

Mat 3:7 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?"

Barclay sees here the picture of animals fleeing a wildfire in an arid place, or perhaps animals in a field scurrying ahead of reapers cutting grain ... critters coming out of their holes in a southern California canyon just before a wind-whipped wildfire gets there ... John is apparently not altogether impressed with the sincerity of some of his listeners ...

in our time, many churches are careful not to ruffle the feathers of anyone that crosses the threshold of the church building, apparently figuring to sneak up on them with the Gospel ... so in the 1st world, there are congregations full of people who are clueless as regards the real condition of their souls ... people who have in no way turned from their rebellion against the King and submitted themselves to God ... John wasn't interested in making people comfortable ... he was, rather, interested in the honor of the King, and the good of his hearers' souls ... J.C. Ryle: "It is no real kindness to keep back the terrors of the Lord; it is good for us to be taught that it is possible to be lost forever, and that all unconverted people are hanging over the brink of the pit." ...

Mat 3:8 Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

John's demand was that if people were going to hang around and be part of the scene at the river, their repentance needed to produce visible results ... the true call to God has always been, and always will be a call to righteous living ... our behavior is not what gives us right standing with God ... it is faith, our trusting in, replying upon, cleaving to, depending upon, believing in Him, that gives us right standing ... but righteous living does follow from that kind of real faith ... and if there is no change in behavior, no fruit, then there is no faith or repentance, and one has not truly met God ...

Mat 3:9 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.

John identifies the popular thinking that "I am a descendant of Abraham, a member of the chosen people, one who can count on the merits of my ancestor to put me right with God" for the foolishness that it is ... physical descent guarantees nothing ... each of us faces God ourselves, either washed in the blood of Christ ourselves, or personally guilty and in our rebellious natural state ... the faith of our parents will not substitute for our own ... John is absolutely insistent that right actions will follow from a true faith ...

Mat 3:10 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.

a fruit tree that bears no fruit is useless ... it only takes up space in the orchard where another more productive tree might be growing ... God is merciful and kind, but He is also completely just ... He gives us the means to produce fruit and justly expects fruit ... consider the parable of the talents and the end of the

servant who buried his talent ... we are to be making good with God's ample provision, and bearing the fruit of righteousness ... the same was true of John's hearers ...

Mat 3:11 "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.

this is proper genuine Christian humility ... in Chapter 11 Jesus is going to tell the disciples that John was the greatest man who ever lived before the establishment of the church ... John has to know that he's been specially chosen of God to carry the most important message ever given to a human being up to his time ... but he's not looking for personal glory ... he understands that his role is to point people to Jesus ... there is none of our fallen strutting about as if we were the show to be found in John ... John's focus is on Jesus ...

Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire ... the first part is clear enough ... it's the fulfillment of OT prophecies like

Isa 44:3 For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.

Eze 36:26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

Eze 36:27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Eze 37:14 And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD."

Eze 39:29 And I will not hide my face anymore from them, when I pour out my Spirit upon the house of Israel, declares the Lord GOD."

Joe 2:28 "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.

this is the promise that God's Spirit will bring His life, power, and truth to those who put their trust in Jesus, the promise that those who put their trust in Christ will indeed be given a new heart, a heart of flesh ...

the second part of the promised work of Jesus is perhaps not so clear and has been interpreted 2 quite different ways through Christian history ... "baptized with fire" may refer to the tongues of fire in the upper room, and may therefore mean essentially the same thing as the first part of the phrase, that God will put His Holy Spirit on believers ... if this is the right reading, it is worth noting that God's Spirit does a purifying/refining work in a believer's life ... this is the work of "fire" ... on the other hand, the baptism in fire may mean something else entirely ... there is the image in verse 10 of the burning of the unproductive tree ... in verse 7 there is the image of critters scurrying before the wildfire ... and verse 12 has the image of burning up chaff ... the 2 parts of the phrase "with the Holy Spirit and fire" may refer to the 2 quite different effects that Christ brings to people ... for those who choose to put their faith in Him, there is the life of the Spirit ... for those who choose to continue in rebellion, there is judgment/unquenchable fire ...

Mat 3:12 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 picture is one of tossing harvested grain up in the air ... the heavy grain then falls to the ground, while the chaff blows off before being gathered up into a burn pile ... it's equivalent to the picture that Jesus uses of separating the wheat from the tares ... in the context here, the warning is to repent and bear the corresponding fruit ...

Mat 3:13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him.

Mat 3:14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

John humbly protests that it is he and not Jesus that stands guilty before the Father ... that if either he or Jesus needs to repent and signify that by baptism, it is clearly he that needs to be baptized ... indeed, if we put ourselves in John's place, it does seem uncomfortable to contemplate baptizing Jesus ... but the glory of the Gospel is that God took on human flesh and chose to identify Himself with our misery ... Jesus is absolutely innocent ... He has no need of baptism on His own account as a sign of repentance ... but it is fitting for humanity, and He tells John that it is fitting that He join us ... John's baptism was a sign of both repentance and readiness for the Kingdom of God, and in that second meaning, Jesus *does* participate with us ...

Mat 3:15 But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.

Mat 3:16 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;

Mat 3:17 and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

when the Father speaks, He uses phrases from 2 OT passages ... the first is one the Jews of the time absolutely would have understood as having reference to Messiah ... my Son ...

Psa 2:7 I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you.

the second phrase "with whom I am well pleased" is from one of the suffering servant passages of Isaiah, and in the popular understanding of the time might not be so readily seen as having to do with Messiah ...

Isa 42:1 Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.

John has done his job ... he's preached repentance and pointed people to Jesus ... his baptizing of Jesus has been the forum for the Father's announcement of Jesus, His Son, Messiah ... a Messiah that from the start is contrary to popular expectations ... a Messiah who is going to be a suffering servant in the style that the prophet Isaiah foresaw ...