

Matthew Chapter Three

Great Things were spoken

Great things were spoken both of John and Jesus, at and before their births, which would have given occasion to expect some extraordinary appearances of a divine presence and power with them when they were very young; but it was otherwise. Except for Luke's account of an incident in the life of Jesus when He was twelve (Luke 2:41-50) nothing appears remarkable concerning either of them, until they were about thirty years old.

John the Baptist

John the Baptist was a priest of the order of Aaron, yet we find him preaching in a wilderness, and never officiating in the temple; Jesus who was not a son of Aaron, is often found in the temple, and sitting there as one having authority; as it was foretold in Malachi 3:1.

Mal 3:1

3 "Look! I am sending my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. Then the Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to his Temple. The messenger of the covenant, whom you look for so eagerly, is surely coming," says the Lord of Heaven's Armies.

NLT

Those who expected the coming of the forerunner of the Messiah expected the forerunner to come in spectacular manner, fitting for one who had such a great responsibility. John did not appear dressed in the robes of a scribe, his clothing was plain, similar to Elijah's clothing (2 Kings 1:8) and was the usual dress of prophets (Zechariah 13:4). His diet was consisting of locusts and wild honey; this does not mean he did not eat anything else.

John showed the deep sense he had of the time and place he lived in, which made the preaching of repentance necessary. His call to repent agreed with his office as Messiah's forerunner. His calling people to repent showed that he knew what the kingdom of heaven was, and had experienced the powers of it.

Great multitudes came to him from the city, and from all parts of the country; men, women, young and old, rich and poor, Pharisees and publicans. This was a great honor put upon John, that so many attended him, and with so much respect. Those who are humble, self-denying, and dead to the world, command respect; and men have a secret value and reverence for them, more than they would admit. This gave John a great opportunity of doing well, and was evidence that God was with him.

Those who came to where John was preaching the word and repented were baptized, thereby professing their repentance, and their belief that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. Their baptism was a testimony of their repentance.

The Pharisees and Sadducees

When John saw these Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was preaching and baptizing he did not give them the titles, much less the applauses, they had been used to; he calls them a "brood of vipers" (Matt 3:7). In this reference to a brood of vipers, John was telling the Pharisees and Sadducees they were like the venomous and poisonous viper. Their malice and enmity to everything that was good is as deadly as the bite of a viper. They gloried in the fact that they were the seed of Abraham; but John showed them that they were the serpent's seed, the seed of Satan.

John's question, "who warned you to flee from the wrath to come" implies they were in danger of the wrath to come, and their hearts so hardened in sin, that it was almost impossible to convince them they needed to repent.

The Pharisees and Sadducees believed they did not need to repent because they were the descendants of Abraham. However, John points out this will not provide escape from judgment, and the wrath to come.

It is vain presumption to think that our having good relations will save us. Although we might be descended from pious ancestors, are part of families where the fear of God is uppermost; and have good friends to advise us, and pray for us; what will all this avail us, if we do not repent, and live a life of repentance? Multitudes, by resting in the honors and advantages of their visible church-membership, will fall short of heaven.

Note, John's warning

Matt 3:10

10 Even now the ax of God's judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire.

NLT

John's point is, a person regardless of their gifts and honors, their external professions and performances, if they do not produce the fruits of repentance, is disowned as a tree in God's vineyard, unworthy to have room there, and is cast into the fire of God's wrath. If not fit for fruit, they are fit for fuel. Probably this refers to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. The other judgments that came upon Jerusalem were comparable to the cutting off of the branches, or cutting down of the body of the tree, leaving the root to bud again, but the coming wrath would be the total, final, and irrecoverable destruction of that people that continue in their sinful ways.

John closes his warning with a word of instruction concerning Jesus, in whom all John's preaching centered.

Note, the words of dignity and pre-eminence John emphasizes. Note, how John speaks of himself, that he might magnify Jesus (Mt 11), "As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I." Though John had much power, for he came in the spirit and power of Elijah, Jesus has more; though John was truly great in the sight of the Lord, yet John says, "I am not fit to remove His sandals" (v 11). It is a great comfort to the faithful ministers who recognize that Jesus Christ is mightier than they are and can do for them what they cannot do for themselves.

With Spirit and Fire

When it was prophesied that a forerunner would be sent to announce the coming of the Messiah (Malachi 3:1) it was also predicted, "The Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple" (Malachi 3:1). Instead of water, John said, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (v 11). This He did in the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit conferred upon the apostles. This He does in the graces and comforts of the Spirit given to them that ask Him.

Those who are baptized with the Holy Spirit are baptized as with fire. Is fire enlightening; the Holy Spirit is a Spirit of illumination. Is fire warming? Is fire consuming? Does the Holy Spirit consume the dross of corruptions? Does fire make all it seizes like itself? Does the Holy Spirit make the soul holy like Him? The answer to these questions is, yes.

Finally, "His winnowing fork is in His hand"

Matt 3:12

12 He is ready to separate the chaff from the wheat with his winnowing fork. Then he will clean up the threshing area, gathering the wheat into his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire."

NLT

His winnowing fork refers to the authority of Jesus. The visible church is Christ's floor. The temple, a type of church, was built upon a threshing-floor, on this floor there is a mixture of wheat and chaff. True believers are as wheat, substantial, useful, and valuable; hypocrites are as chaff, light, and empty, useless and worthless, and carried about with every wind; these are now mixed, good and bad, under the same external profession; and in the same visible communion. However, there is a day coming when the floor shall be purged, and the wheat and chaff shall be separated. In the day of the last judgment that will be the great winnowing, and saints and sinners shall be parted forever. Heaven is the barn into which Jesus Christ will shortly gather all his wheat, and not a grain of it shall be lost: He will gather them, as the ripe fruits were gathered in. In heaven the saints are brought together, and no longer scattered;

they are safe, and separated from corrupt neighbors without, and corrupt affections within, and there is no chaff among them. They are not only gathered into the barn, they are gathered into the garner, where they are thoroughly purified. Hell is the unquenchable fire that will burn up the chaff, which will certainly be the portion and punishment, and everlasting destruction, of hypocrites and unbelievers.

Today we are in the field, in the future we shall be on the floor

Baptism of Jesus

John has been preaching a baptism unto repentance. The people, who have listened to his preaching, were convinced of their sins, repented, and then received baptism as a witness to and sign of their inner purification. However, when Jesus came to John, it was not as one who had sinned and wanted to repent, He was sinless, if He were not sinless, then we have no gospel. John saw standing before him the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world, the one coming that was greater than he, whose sandals he was not worthy to remove. John told Jesus, "I have need to be baptized by You."

Jesus responded to John by saying that it was proper for them to do this to fulfill all righteousness. There are two important words in Jesus' response, first is the word "us." The fulfilling all righteousness was something John and Jesus had to do. The fulfilling of all righteousness required Jesus submitting to the ritual of baptism and John performing the ritual of baptism. John's performance of the ritual would be part of his fulfillment of his mission as the forerunner who announces the coming of the Messiah.

The second important word is "righteousness." The basic meaning of righteousness is holy and upright living in accordance with God's standard, and conforming to an authoritative standard. As used in Matthew's account of the baptism of Jesus, the word "righteousness" means doing the will of God. It means being in harmony with the will of God. Therefore, the idea of fulfilling all righteousness means that Jesus is committing Himself to do God's will and conforming to the standard that is the will of God.

God's will for Jesus was revealed in Isaiah 53. Jesus is the Suffering Servant that will be "numbered with the transgressors."

When Jesus comes to John to be baptized by John He began to be identified with sinners, as Isaiah had prophesied that the Lord would lay on Him the iniquity of us all. Further, Isaiah described this one as God's righteous servant: "my righteous servant will justify many." In addition, the Servant of the Lord, would take their sins on Himself, and justify them through the suffering He would endure. Jesus was saying that this baptism was the beginning of all that; it was here that He began to fulfill the righteous will of God that He becomes the Suffering Servant who would take on Himself the sins of the world. This baptism was the beginning of that ministry.

The rest of the passage records the response of God the Father. When Jesus went up out of the water, heaven opened and the Spirit of God descending like a dove on Him, we must be very careful to read correctly, what Matthew wrote. It does not say a dove descended on Him, but the Spirit of God. The image of the dove describes the way in which the Spirit was descending, descending like a dove and lighting on Him.

Two Important Points

There are two important points concerning the coming of the Spirit of God on Jesus, **first**, in Old Testament times, kings, priests, prophets, judges were anointed with oil, with that anointing came divine empowerment to do the work set out before them. What we have here in our passage is the reality of the Father's anointing of the Son for the ministry that lay before Him. It was not just an anointing to preach, but for His whole life to make atonement for sin. Even Jesus needed that extra divine empowerment to do the will of the Father, and so the Spirit of God descended on Him. By this, Heaven approved His commitment to do the will of God the Father and provided the power to fulfill it. Without the power of the Spirit of God, He would not have been able to fulfill God's plan of salvation.

Second, why is the description of the dove used? The dove is often described in terms of peace, especially in the light of the dove sent out by Noah after the judgment of God on the earth. The dove is a harmless and gentle creature. However, is “peace” all that is meant here?

Doves played an important role in the religion of Israel. They were the sacrifices of the poor people who could not afford bulls or goats. The Book of Leviticus lays out how the sacrifices were graded according to income. The dove with its gentleness and harmlessness was accessible to the lowliest of the people. So right after Jesus made His commitment to doing the will of the Father to become the suffering Servant for the sins of the world, the Spirit descends as a dove, a bird of sacrifice for sin for the lowliest of the people. The dove then also symbolizes power in gentleness, the power of God to salvation in the meek and lowly Savior, and the dove re-enforces the idea of Jesus’ identification here with the people of Israel.

Therefore, Matthew is showing that the King was here empowered by the Holy Spirit to deal with what was wrong in the kingdom and to set it right. Jesus has the will to do it; and He now has the power.

Finally, according to the Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7) the king would be known as God’s “Son.” He would have a special relationship with the Father, and He would be the heir of all things. The gospels identify Jesus as this King, this Messiah, this Son; but He does not receive His kingdom at His first coming (Hebrews 1). The second way the Bible uses “Son” to describe Jesus is to emphasize that He has the same nature as the Father, namely, that He is eternal and divine. Sometimes the people who followed Jesus declared that they believed He was the Son of God, no doubt thinking in terms of the first meaning. However, their words were used by the writers with the fuller meaning as well because they were writing with the evidence of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

For example, Peter declared to Jesus...

Matt 16:16
16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."
NASU

The voice from heaven states that the Father is well pleased with the Son

Was there anything Jesus should repent of, no? Was there anything He should have been doing differently? No. This witness from heaven affirms that, as the Lamb of God He is spotless. He always did what was pleasing to the Father, and of no one but Jesus could this be said.

The baptism of Jesus was unique. It was not like John’s baptism before it; and it is not exactly like Christian baptism after it. There are similarities of course, but because Jesus was sinless, His baptism was different.

By His baptism, Jesus identified with the people, the sinful people He came to save. In addition, by His baptism Jesus submitted to the will of the Father, beginning His service as the Suffering Servant who would die for the sins of the world. Moreover, God the Father approved it, and sent God the Spirit to empower it. In addition, John witnessed it.

It is important that we look at the meaning of the event, and not the event itself. We cannot make a simple application to our lives from the event because it is a report about a unique event in Jesus’ life. There is no, “Go and do likewise” in this event. However, we can use the meaning of this event to make a practical application, simply because Jesus is the primary example for us of doing the will of God.

God desires every believer to make a commitment to do His will, and doing that means sacrificial service to God, and to others.

This commitment often comes at the same time as conversion, but it may also come later when we realize what God desires of us. It should be connected with Christian baptism, if possible, because the ritual of baptism, as in the first century, is a sign of commitment to the Lord.

God's will for us is recorded in Scripture. Since it will mean a life of sacrificial service, or to put it another way, since it will not be a natural or easy way of life, we need the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, far more than Jesus did. The Christian life is not natural; it is supernatural. The epistles are filled with instructions for Christians to present their bodies as living sacrifices, and to be filled with the Spirit.

With such a life of spiritual service, our heavenly Father will be well pleased.

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