

St. Matthew

Chapter 3

The third chapter of Matthew skips from Jesus' childhood to the beginning of His ministry. Joseph, who played such a central role in the first two chapters is never mentioned again. The chapter begins with the preaching and baptizing of John the Baptist, his call to repentance. Matthew then recounts Jesus' coming to John to be baptized.

John the Baptist (3:1-12)

In those days. The only event that we know of Jesus' life between the return from Egypt and His baptism is the visit to the temple when He was twelve years old. [Luke 2:41-52] Jesus' work of Messiah and Redeemer begins in earnest when He is baptized at age 29.

John the Baptist. From *Smith's Bible Dictionary*:

John the Baptist was of the priestly race by both parents, for his father, Zacharias, was himself a priest of the course of Abia or Abijah, [1Ch 24:10](#), and his mother, Elisabeth, was of the daughters of Aaron. [Luk 1:5](#). His birth was foretold, by an angel sent from God, and is related at length in Luke 1. The birth of John preceded by six months, that of our Lord. John was ordained to be a Nazarite from his birth. [Luk 1:15](#).

Dwelling by himself in the wild and thinly-peopled region westward of the Dead Sea, he prepared himself for the wonderful office, to which he had been divinely called. His dress was that of the old prophets -- a garment woven of camel's hair, [2Ki 1:8](#), attached to the body by a leathern girdle. His food was such as the desert afforded -- locusts, [Lev 11:22](#), and wild honey. [Psa 81:16](#).

And now, the long-secluded hermit came forth, to the discharge of his office. His supernatural birth, his life, and the general expectation that some great one was about to appear, were sufficient to attract to him, a great multitude from "every quarter." [Mat 3:5](#). Many of every class pressed forward to confess their sins, and to be baptized. Jesus himself came from Galilee to Jordan, to be baptized of John.

From incidental notices, we learn that John and his disciples continued to baptize, some time after our Lord entered upon his ministry. See [Joh 3:23](#); [Joh 4:1](#); [Act 19:3](#). We gather also that John instructed his disciples, in certain moral and religious duties, as fasting, [Mat 9:14](#); [Luk 5:33](#), and prayer. [Luk 11:1](#).

But shortly after he had given his testimony to the Messiah, John's public ministry was brought to a close. In daring disregard of the divine laws, Herod Antipas had taken to himself Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip; and when John reprov'd him for this, as well as for other sins, [Luk 3:19](#), Herod cast him into prison. (March, A.D. 28). The place of his confinement, was the castle of Machaerus, a fortress on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea. It was here that reports reached him, of the miracles which our Lord was working in Judea.

Nothing, but the death of the Baptist, would satisfy the resentment of Herodias. A court festival was kept at Machaerus in honor of the king's birthday. After supper, the daughter of Herodias came in, and danced for the king and, by her grace, he promised with an oath, to give her whatsoever she should ask. Salome, prompted by her abandoned mother, demanded the head of John the Baptist. Herod gave instructions to an officer of his guard, who went and executed John in the prison, and his head was brought, to feast the eyes of the adulteress, whose sins he had denounced. His death is supposed to have occurred, just before the third Passover, in the course of the Lord's ministry. (March, A.D. 29).

We want to add the following points concerning John the Baptist:

- Zacharias and Elizabeth were of advanced age, and Elizabeth was barren. Her conception is miraculous in line with many of the opening barren wombs of the Old Testament. [*Sara, Hannah,*



see especially 1 Samuel 1:1-2:11] This birth is an answer to Zacharias' prayers. "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth." [Luke 1:13-14]

- At the birth of John Zacharias "was filled with the Holy Spirit" and gives a prophecy of his son. Perhaps the best summary of John's prophetic work are these words,

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest;
For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,
To give knowledge of salvation to His people
By the remission of their sins. [Luke 1:76,77]

- John is the promised and expected forerunner of the Messiah. This is seen in Matthews quotation of Isaiah 40. See also the very last verses of the Old Testament, Malachi 4:4-6.
- John is the last of the Old Testament prophets. Jesus says of John the Baptist, "Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of woman there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" [Matthew 11:11-15]



Preaching. John comes preaching, that is, announcing what he is told to announce. He is a herald. Lenski notes, "Preaching, in the Biblical sense, is merely to announce clearly and distinctly exactly what God orders us to announce in his Word. We dare not change the message by alteration, by omission, or by addition. The preacher is not to utter his own eloquent wisdom but is to confine himself to the foolishness and the *skandalon* of the gospel."

Repent. John's preaching is summarized, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" [Matthew 3:2] The word repentance is one of the most important words of the Bible and in the Lord's church. What is repentance? Our Confessions answer simply: "Properly speaking, repentance consists of these two parts: one is contrition, that is, terror smiting the conscience with the knowledge of sin, and the other is faith, which is born of the Gospel, or of absolution, believes that sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, comforts the conscience, and delivers it from terror." [The Augsburg Confession, XII.3-5] John's preaching of repentance is a call to both sorrow and faith, that his hearers would embrace and trust the promises of the soon coming of the Messiah, "the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

This sermon by John is the same sermon that Jesus preaches as He begins His teaching after His temptation, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." [Matthew 4:17]

In the very first of the 95 Theses, Luther says, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent', he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." Some have said that the whole Reformation was a debate about the Biblical teaching of repentance.

The Kingdom of Heaven. The kingdom of heaven is a constant theme in the Gospel of Matthew (the phrase occurs 32 times) and in the teaching of Jesus. While the teaching of the kingdom will continue to

unfold in the Gospel of Matthew and the teaching of Jesus, we will make a few comments by way of introduction. It is clear that the kingdom of God is nothing more than the rule of the King (Jesus) among men. This is what we call the church. When John says, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand,” he is saying, “The Messiah is at hand; Jesus is nearby.”



Jesus teaches us to pray, “Thy kingdom come.” How does the kingdom come? From the catechism we learn the answer, “God’s kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity.”

Especially here in chapter three, the kingdom of heaven is in contrast to the bloody and ruthless kingdom of Herod in chapter two.

John’s Sermon of Repentance. John preaches the law and the Gospel. He calls the people to repent of their wickedness and their pride, of their presumption that their patronage is their salvation. “God can raise up children of Abraham from these stones.” [Matthew 3:9] Indeed, to be a child of Abraham has nothing to do with blood and everything to do with faith.

“Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham.” [Galatians 3:7, see also 3:26-29, Ephesians 2:11-19; Romans 9:6ff] John, indeed, has his preaching ax laid at the root of all pride, cutting it low to make straight Jesus’ way.

But John also preaches the Gospel, for he preaches about Jesus. Granted, Jesus will come in judgment, “His winnowing fan is in His hand,” [Matthew 3:12], but Jesus will graciously gather His wheat into the barn. Whose wheat? This coming one will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. We are the beneficiaries of this washing and baptism of the Holy Spirit in the forgiveness of all of our sins.

Jesus is Baptized (3:13-17)

To Fulfill All Righteousness. When Jesus presents Himself to John to be Baptized, John is stunned. “I have need to be baptized by You.” [Matthew 3:14] John is baptizing for repentance, and Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, has no sin and therefore no need of repentance. Why, then, is Jesus baptized? Jesus Himself answers the question for us. “Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Jesus’ baptism, then, fulfills all righteousness. What does this mean?

We’ve used the following illustration to show the significance of Jesus’ baptism. Imagine a huge flock of sheep on the edge of a river, and all of the sheep are absolutely filthy. Their wool is matted and covered in filth and muck. There are burs and twigs stick in them. They are mangy and weak and ugly. One by one these sheep step into the water and all of their filth is washed off, they walk out the other side sparkling and gleaming white while all their dirtiness is left floating on the top of the water. Sheep after sheep, all is washed off. The top of the river looks like an oil spill.



Now, imagine that in the midsts of all of these filthy sheep there is one clean sheep, perfectly clean and white and fluffy and flawless. This sheep goes down to the edge of the river and steps in, and all of the dirt and filth and muck floating on the water is absorbed into his perfectly white wool. He takes it all onto himself. And now the river itself is clean and pure, and everything dirty and stinky, everything, is on this pure and perfect lamb. This Lamb is Jesus, and this is His baptism to fulfill all righteousness.

Luther's Baptismal Prayer.

Almighty and eternal God, according to Your strict judgment You condemned the unbelieving world through the flood, yet according to Your great mercy You preserved believing Noah and his family, eight souls in all. You drowned hard-hearted Pharaoh and all his host in the Red Sea, yet led Your people Israel through the water on dry ground, foreshadowing this washing of Your Holy Baptism. Through the Baptism in the Jordan of Your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, You sanctified and instituted all waters to be a blessed flood and a lavish washing away of sin.

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. The two most vivid and explicit texts in the Bible that show forth each person of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, at one time are Matthew 3:16-17 and Matthew 29:18-20. Both of these have to do with baptism.

In the first, the Son of God is coming up out of the water, the Holy Spirit is descending in the form of a dove, and the Father speaks from heaven, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." In the second text Jesus sends His apostles out to make disciples, baptizing in "the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

What does baptism have to do with the teaching of the Holy Trinity?

We rejoice that our heavenly Father speaks to us in our baptism the same way He spoke to His dear Son, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."



St. Matthew

Chapter 4

Immediately after coming up out of the water Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness where He fasted for forty days and forty nights. He is there tempted by the devil, but overcomes him and wins the victory. It is the same with us; we emerge from the waters of baptism with the devil as our enemy and we enter a life-long battle against him. “Every Christian as soon as he's baptized, is marshaled into an army in confrontation with the devil, and from his baptism onward is saddled with the devil who harasses him as long as he lives.” [Martin Luther, *Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, 5.313] On this earth being invaded by the kingdom of heaven there is no neutral ground; to be with God is to be against the devil.

Chapter four also includes the beginning of Jesus' preaching in Galilee, the calling of Peter, Andrew, James and John, and ends with a summary of the Lord Jesus' teaching and healing.



Jesus' Temptation in the Wilderness (4:1-11)

The voice of the heavenly Father boomed from heaven at Jesus' baptism, “This is My beloved Son.” It is this voice that the devil questions in the wilderness, “If you are the Son of God.” [Matthew 4:3,6] This is the devil's chief temptation, that we would doubt the word of God. In these temptations we hear the echoes of the Garden of Eden, “Did God really say?” [Genesis 3:1]

John Milton was an English playwright whose most famous poem is titled *Paradise Lost*. In this epic he recounts the temptation and fall of Adam and Eve, their disobedience to God and their being ousted from the Garden of Eden. Less known is Milton's minor epic *Paradise R'Gained* (1671), a poem about Jesus' temptation and victory in the wilderness. The first lines are:

I Who erewhile the happy Garden sung,
By one man's disobedience lost, now sing
Recovered Paradise to all mankind,
By one man's firm obedience fully tried
Through all temptation, and the Tempter foiled
In all his wiles, defeated and repulsed,
And Eden raised in the waste Wilderness.



The comparison between Adam and Christ is not new. St Paul does the same in Romans 5:12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-26,45-49. Jesus is the new and greater Adam, the One who does what the perfect man and woman could not do: overcome the devil. This is, in fact, what God had promised in the “first Gospel”, Genesis 3:15.

(It will be noted later in our study, but it is fitting now also to mention that the forty days in the wilderness are to be contrasted with the forty days that the Lord spends on earth between His resurrection and Ascension.)

The Three Temptations. From the Gospels of Mark and Luke we learn that the devil's tempting lasted the duration of the forty days. The last three temptations (as recorded in Matthew and Luke) show the climax of the devil's evil working and, therefore, the highlight of Jesus' victory over the devil.