

John the Baptizer

Matthew 3:1-12

Jesus is the messiah, the son of Abraham and the son of David, and the new king of Israel. God protected Him from Herod, sent Him with Joseph and Mary to Egypt, and settled them in Galilee. Now about 30 years later in 26 or 27 A.D., Jesus' cousin, John the prophet and baptizer, announces His kingdom. Jesus would later say of about John, "Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Matt. 11:11). With courage and wisdom John calls Israel to repent of their sins, bear fruit, and know the Christ.

A Voice in the Wilderness

John comes preaching in the wilderness of Judea, a hardscrabble man wearing camel skins, a leather belt, and eating locusts and wild honey (vv. 1, 4). Locusts were both clean and good (Lev. 11:11), the way snails, goose liver, and clams are now to us. But like wild honey, you find them in the desert and not in the buffet line in Jerusalem. John doesn't wear soft garments and speak flattery like the quislings in Herod's house, but comes in the power of Elijah who is described as "A hairy man wearing a leather belt around his waist" (2 Kgs. 1:18). Elijah prophesied against wicked king Ahab and his murderous wife Jezebel just like John will against king Herod and his wife Herodias who will eventually have John's head on a platter. John fulfills what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of Yahweh; Make His paths straight'" (v. 3). This is good news about return from exile, coming back to Israel from Babylon to dwell in the land of milk and honey again. The paths made straight lead home to Jerusalem: "Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned; for she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins" (Is. 40:2). John is going to speak pointed words, but for those with ears to hear, they are the means of repentance, change, healing, comfort, and restoration. God sends prophets to preach the good news in order to draw people to Him for grace and salvation.

Baptism of Repentance

The message is clear as crystal: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (v. 2). The reason and urgency for repentance is the presence of the kingdom of heaven. "At hand" does not mean it is not too far away, but that it's here; you are in the presence of the power of the king. Jesus uses the exact same phrase when He first preaches (Matt. 4:17). The "kingdom of heaven" is not about going to heaven when you die; this is not a message about making sure you square up with God before you die. This is an announcement that the kingdom of heaven has come in the present, that there is radical action to take now. Jesus is a king with a land, a dominion, a world that He governs. After He died, rose, and ascended into heaven, the apostles take the same urgent message: "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31). Repentance literally means "a change of mind" (*meta noia*). It's not just outward, external behavior change, although it includes that. It begins first with conviction that you have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, of the way He created you to live (Rom. 3:23). You aren't convicted about mistakes, accidents, or excusable ignorance, but inexcusable, rebellious, unholy sin—the culpable breaking of God's law. Second, repentance includes confession of sin to God and seeking His forgiveness—the grace that comes through Christ alone who died for us (1 Jn. 1:9). Third, repentance includes change. Having changed your mind, you change your life. God liberates us from sin. This is not a one-and-done event but a lifelong process of love, growth, and change into greater holiness. Luther's first thesis: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." We sin throughout our lives, and

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sometimes struggle with same sins for many years, but God is never done forgiving, loving, and receiving the humble and repentant who come to Him for grace. Baptism signifies and seals our union with Christ, marking us as His children and leading us down this path of lifelong discipleship. John Calvin: “A sacrament, then, is not a dumb ceremony, exhibiting some unmeaning pomp without doctrine; but the word of God is joined to it, and gives life to the outward ceremony. By the word I mean, not mutterings of a magical character, made by some exorcist between his teeth, but what is pronounced with a clear and distinct voice, and leads to the edification of faith. For we are not simply told, that John baptized into repentance, as if the grace of God were contained in a visible sign; but that he explained, in his preaching, advantage of baptism, that the sign, through the word preached, might produce its effect.” Like a marriage vow, baptism visibly expresses and objectively establishes a status: Christian. It obligates the one baptized to conform the inner self to the outer profession, and God uses it over our lifetime to bless and conform us to the image of Christ (cf. Rom. 6:1ff.).

Children from Stones

Everyone is called to the waters of baptism, but when the Pharisees and Sadducees come, John wants to know who invited them (v. 7). This is because all who come must acknowledge their complete need, *as much as anyone else*, of the grace and forgiveness of God. The Pharisees were theological conservatives, “Puritans” probably descended from Ezra, who wanted freedom from Roman rule. They focused on conformity to the law but in a perverse and hackneyed way, ignoring the weightier matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matt. 23:23). The Sadducees were theological liberals who denied bodily resurrection and the existence of angels, and they wanted political stability and peace under Rome. Though enemies, these groups exploited regular folk in Israel and teamed up to oppose Jesus and His disciples. They would confess some sins but were also thankful they weren’t sinners the way others were (cf. Jn. 7:49; Lk. 18:9-14). They prided themselves on descending from Abraham, so John calls them the offspring of snakes (vv. 7-9). God has no grandchildren, only children. It’s an enormous blessing to have parents and grandparents who know the Lord, but you must know Him yourself. God doesn’t need our Christian traditions, families, churches, schools, or theological pedigrees. He can raise sons of Abraham from stones (v. 9). John is attacking covenant presumption, the idea that salvation is ours automatically rather than by grace through faith, all of it the gift of God. Presumption is an invitation to judgment, and it doesn’t produce fruit worthy of repentance (v. 8). When John says “even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees” (v. 10), he means that Israel is about to be chopped down. In Isaiah’s day Assyria was God’s ax (Is. 10:15); in Jesus’ it was the Romans (cf. Rom. 11:17-24; Matt. 24:2). Jesus is going to winnow His people, calling sinners and sheep without a shepherd to Himself and sending the proud away.

Conclusion

At the end of the Old Testament, God said through Malachi: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse” (Mal. 4:5-7). John is the new Elijah who turns the hearts of God’s people. Hard works make soft hearts, and soft words make hard hearts. Jesus comes preaching the gospel, baptizing with the Holy Spirit and fire, calling sinners to repent and believe. The kingdom is here, and the way to live in it, enjoy it, to know and love its King, is to forsake sin and trust Him.