



The Gospel of Matthew - Chapter Three

Summary of Chapter Three

Matthew now turns his attention to the point in history that was to mark the start of Jesus' earthly ministry. Before Jesus could start to teach, his presence had to be re-announced for more than thirty years had passed since God had ordained the birth of his Son in human form.

Shortly before the birth of Jesus, God had presented the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth with a son, who subsequently was raised in the wilderness, probably by priestly members of his own family, in order to prepare for his historic role in announcing the arrival of the Kingdom of God in Jesus, the Messiah; a role that had been previously announced through the prophets.

Despite his wild appearance, John was clearly a well educated man and a great teacher of the Scriptures. He was filled with the Holy Spirit and anointed to bring a specific message by preaching the Word of God and calling all Israel to repentance, baptising them with water as an outward sign of their acceptance of his message. Many people, including religious leaders, flocked to John.

One day, when John was baptising people in the River Jordan, Jesus came to him. John immediately recognised that this was the Messiah and proclaimed that he should be baptised by the Christ, but Jesus corrected him, saying that he must be baptised by John to fulfil all righteousness.

The baptism was as much spiritual as physical, for the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus and he was proclaimed to be anointed for his role by His heavenly Father, who announced it in an audible voice.

II. Matthew 3:1-17 - John the Baptist Prepares for the Appearance of the Messianic Kingdom

Matthew's introduction to Jesus' public ministry does not end with the stories of Jesus' childhood, as ancient biographies often include other introductory qualifications and Matthew's Gospel is no exception, for he now reports the attestation of the prophet John the Baptist, the heavenly voice of God the Father, and the empowering of the Holy Spirit on Jesus.

II.a Matthew 3:1-12 - The Proclamation of John the Baptist

John the Baptist now appears, preaching in the Judæan desert. It is probably 30 years since Joseph and his family moved back to Nazareth and the focus of Matthew's Gospel now shifts to Jesus' public ministry, which is heralded in by John's call for repentance by the people and the baptism of Jesus, as the approved Son of God.

Nothing had been written about John since the time of his birth as recorded in Luke Chapter 1. He would have been in his mid-30's when he received the Word of God to go forth to preach the arrival of the Kingdom of God and the coming of the Messiah.

God does not seem to implement anything significant without announcing it first through his prophets: <<***Surely the Lord God does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets***>> (Amos 3:7). This, the greatest of all occasions in history, was to be announced through the last of the OT prophets.

The warnings in this passage serve two functions for Matthew's persecuted readers: judgment against persecutors both vindicates the righteous they oppress and warns the righteous not to become wicked: <<***But if the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die. None of the transgressions that they have committed shall be remembered against them; for the righteousness that they have done they shall live. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? But when the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity and do the same abominable things that the wicked do, shall they live? None of the righteous deeds that they have done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which they are guilty and the sin they have committed, they shall die***>> (Ezekiel 18:21-24).

¹ In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judæa, proclaiming,

Matthew 3:1

In those days may seem imprecise and scholars have longed to know the dates, or at least the year, such statements refer to. It is known from Luke that: <<***Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work***>> (Luke 3:23a), but given the other data concerning Jesus' birth and death, along with references to the reigns of certain kings and other historical figures, this would most likely have been around AD29-30, with Jesus being in his mid-30s.

So little is known of the majority of the lives of either of these men, yet what is known is of incalculable value. Both men were servants of God to the point of death and beyond. One even was God, yet hidden from view for much of his earthly life: <<***Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Saviour***>> (Isaiah 45:15).

John the Baptist was born around 6BC to devout parents who were both of the priestly line and well advanced in age, as recorded in Luke 1:5-25 and Luke 1:39-80. John played an important historical role in linking God's saving activity in the OT and his saving activity in the person and work of Jesus.

That John appeared in the wilderness of Judæa would have been highly significant symbolism for the Jewish readers of this text who were awaiting the second Exodus through the promised Messiah. Israel's prophets had predicted a new exodus in the wilderness: <<*Therefore, I will now persuade her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. From there I will give her her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt*>> (Hosea 2:14-15), and: <<*A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God'*>> (Isaiah 40:3).

Thus Jewish people in John's days acknowledged the wilderness as the appropriate place for prophets and a messiah. It was said of the prophets of old that: <<*They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented – of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground*>> (Hebrews 11:37-38), and the great man of God, Elijah, frequently sought safety and solace in the wilderness: <<*The word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'Go from here and turn eastwards, and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.'* So he went and did according to the word of the Lord; he went and lived by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the wadi>> (1 Kings 17:2-6), as did his successor Elisha: <<*Now the company of prophets said to Elisha, 'As you see, the place where we live under your charge is too small for us. Let us go to the Jordan, and let us collect logs there, one for each of us, and build a place there for us to live.'* He answered, 'Do so'>> (2 Kings 6:1-2). Since it was said of John that: <<*With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord*>> (Luke 1:17), it was fitting for him to emerge from the wilderness in this way.

It was in this same wilderness that David had penned the 63rd Psalm, picturing not desolation but a place of sweet communion with God: <<*O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water*>> (Psalm 63:1).

Thus John's location symbolises both the coming of a new exodus, the final time of salvation, and the price a true prophet of God must be willing to pay for his or her calling: exclusion from all that society values - its comforts, status symbols and even basic necessities.

His appearing was something of great excitement to the Jews for they had gone more than 300 years without having God speak to them through a prophet, the last being Malachi, who had told God's people: <<*See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts*>> (Malachi 3:1). That messenger had now arrived with the Lord close behind him.

² ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’

Matthew 3:2

To repent, or change one’s mind, in the OT called for a change in a person’s attitude toward God that impacted one’s actions and life choices; it involved the idea of turning, that is, from one way of thinking and living to a different way. Common external signs of repentance included prayers of remorse, as well as confession and renouncing of sin. This call for repentance would later receive apostolic endorsement: <<*While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent*>> (Acts 17:30).

The term Kingdom of Heaven is found only in Matthew’s Gospel but is interchangeable with Kingdom of God, found in all of the Gospels, the Book of Acts and the epistles of Paul. For example, compare: <<*but Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs’*>> (Matthew 19:14), with: <<*But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs’*>> (Mark 10:14), and: <<*But Jesus called for them and said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs’*>> (Luke 18:16).

Matthew refers to the Kingdom of Heaven 31 times but to the Kingdom of God only on 5 occasions. Mark refers to the Kingdom of God on 14 occasions, Luke uses it 32 times, and John only twice; Luke uses it again six times in Acts and Paul refers to the Kingdom of God on 8 occasions.

Has come near. The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand for all people in the person of Jesus, the long awaited Messiah, who was soon to be revealed as the beloved Son of the Father in v.17, and who himself would begin proclaiming that same message of repentance: <<*From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’*>> (Matthew 4:17). Repetition in teaching is important, for people do not always grasp the significance of what they hear or fully understand it. A message is too often forgotten, so repetition is a safeguard: <<*Now I should remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand*>> (1 Corinthians 15:1), and: <<*To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard*>> (Philippians 3:1b). Here John calls for the people to remove the obstacles from their lives that might hinder their reception of the Messiah and his Kingdom.

³ This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,
‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.”’

Matthew 3:3

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke. John the Baptist fulfils the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 40:3 and also the prophecies in Malachi about the

messenger who prepares the way before the Lord: <<See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts>> (Malachi 3:1), as previously noted, and confirmed later by Jesus: <<This is the one about whom it is written, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you”>> (Matthew 11:10), and about Elijah: <<Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse>> (Malachi 4:5-6), <<and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come>> (Matthew 11:14), <<And the disciples asked him, ‘Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?’ He replied, ‘Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognise him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.’ Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist>> (Matthew 17:10-13), and: <<With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord>> (Luke 1:17).

The voice of one crying out and what he is crying out is the Word of God, the Gospel message, i.e. Jesus as the Christ of God: <<In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people>> (John 1:1-4).

⁴ Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

Matthew 3:4

John wore clothing of camel’s hair. John’s appearance would have evoked images of prophecies about Elijah, who was to return to prepare the way for God’s appearance for judgement: <<They answered him, ‘A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist.’ He said, ‘It is Elijah the Tishbite’>> (2 Kings 1:8), as well as Malachi 3:1 and 4:5-6 as recently quoted. John’s clothing was common to nomadic desert dwellers and thus was associated with poorer people.

Locusts and wild honey were not an unusual source of food for people living in the desert. The desert locust, Greek *akris*, is a large grasshopper, still eaten today by poorer people in the Middle East and Africa. It was a clean food according to the law: <<Of them you may eat: the locust according to its kind, the bald locust according to its kind, the cricket according to its kind, and the grasshopper according to its kind>> (Leviticus 11:22).

It should be noted that John came in the spirit of Elijah and was not a reincarnation of Elijah, which is what some had expected.

⁵ Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judæa were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶ and they were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Matthew 3:5-6

Going out to him. John's startling declaration of the nearness of God's Kingdom draws even city dwellers out into the wilderness. This was a new way of preaching that had not been heard in Israel since the days of the OT prophets, and even then it did not have the level of excitement that the nearness of the Messiah would have brought. The message was being delivered by a gifted and Spirit-filled preacher.

John had many attributes as a preacher and proclinator of God's word:

1. He was an affectionate preacher: exhorting and beseeching, he pressed his message home upon his hearers, followed his doctrine closely and was fully sincere.
2. He was a practical preacher: much of his message lifted people to seek their duty before God, directing them to their work but amusing them with matters of subtle speculation.
3. He was a popular preacher: although he had the religious leaders among his followers, it was the common man who was his target audience. He spoke at their level of understanding by keeping his message simple and jargon free.
4. He was an evangelical preacher: bringing the Gospel to the people in all his exhortations, he directed the people to the Christ to come; exciting and encouraging them in their expectations of him. All messengers should press upon their recipients the need to come to Christ, both for righteousness and for strength.
5. He was a copious preacher: the Bible tells how he preached many things. He preached a great deal, shunned not to declare the whole Counsel of God and he varied his preaching so that those who were not reached and touched by one truth, might be by another, but each being effectively the same truth.

Baptise is the Greek word *baptizō*, and means to plunge, dip, or immerse, and John was immersing people in the river Jordan. When people were baptised by him, going under the water symbolised both the cleansing away of sin and a passing safely through the waters of judgment and death. Biblical examples that may have been brought to mind include the great flood in Noah's day (Genesis 7:6-24), the safe passage of the Hebrews before the destruction of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea (Exodus 14:26-29), and the prophet's experience after being thrown off the ship on which he was fleeing from God (Jonah 1:7-16). Paul writes: *<<Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life>>* (Romans 6:4), where baptism pictures a person being buried with Christ, i.e. submersion under water, and being raised to new life with Christ, i.e. the re-emergence from the water. This symbolises the person's union with and incorporation into Christ by the action of the Holy Spirit. Hence,

they now have the power to live in new life. Peter comments on this in his first epistle: *<<And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ>>* (1 Peter 3:21), where he means that baptism saves because it represents inward faith, as evidenced by one's appeal to God for the forgiveness of one's sins for a good conscience. Furthermore, baptism saves only insofar as it is grounded in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christians today differ over whether full bodily immersion is required for the symbolism of baptism.

Having made the difficult and time-consuming journey from Jerusalem, all Judæa and all the region along the Jordan, the people demonstrate their repentance by confessing their sins. Although not a necessary requirement, public confession of sins seems to be more empowering for the individual than when done privately.

⁷ But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Matthew 3:7

Pharisees were a laymen's fellowship, popular with the common people and connected to local synagogues, chiefly characterised by adherence to extensive extra-biblical traditions, which they rigorously obeyed as a means of applying the law to daily life. They wielded significant power and influence in the lives of ordinary Jews. Many were zealous and pious, but there were others that had a reputation of being self-seeking and domineering.

Sadducees were a small group who derived their authority from the activities of the temple. They were removed from the common people by aristocratic and priestly influence as well as by their cooperation with Rome's rule. They did not view God as the Almighty source of power behind all things, did not believe in the spiritual realm including the existence of angels or demons, and they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. They formed the majority group in the ruling council, the Sanhedrin and the High Priest Caiaphas was a Sadducee.

Coming for baptism. These men in the main would not accept Jesus as the Christ but they obviously thought it right to answer the call of this strange new teacher that was calling them to repentance. Whether this was a genuine pious act or undertaken to impress the people can only form the basis of speculation. Some of them may well have been baptised and genuinely repentant, but many were clearly not: *<<(And all the people who heard this, including the tax-collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptised with John's baptism. But by refusing to be baptised by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves)>>* (Luke 7:29-30).

The crowd represented a cross-section of society as indicated here and in: *<<Even tax-collectors came to be baptised, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages'>>* (Luke 3:12-14).

Several commentators have said these were Roman soldiers, thus the first Gentile converts, as Jews were not permitted to serve in the army, at least not within Judæa. However, it most probably refers to Jewish temple guards.

Brood of vipers. Snakes were well known for their subtle movements and lethal strikes, alluding to the character traits of some of these men. These religious leaders were used to being treated with the greatest of respect. John, himself of the priestly line of Aaron, had no fear before these men or the power they could wield for he was filled with the Holy Spirit from within the womb: *<<for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit>>* (Luke 1:15). Jesus too would address the worst of the religious leaders in this way: *<< , then used even stronger language concerning their heritage: <<You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies>>* (John 8:44), which was said in reply to their claim to be children of Abraham! Refer to v.9 and the comments made there.

Female vipers were believed to kill their mate following the act of procreation. It was widely believed in ancient times that the resultant offspring would chew their way out of their mother's womb, thereby killing her, as an act of revenge for their father. Myth though it may have been, to call people a brood of vipers was one of the highest insults that could be made. John would certainly not have been endearing these people to himself.

The wrath to come refers to the coming Messiah and his judgement that will bring punishment for those who do not repent. Scripture gives plenty of examples of God's wrath on sinners and his mercy on those who do repent and show humility. When King Shishak of Egypt came up against Jerusalem to destroy it, King Rehoboam repented and the Lord relented: *<<Because he humbled himself the wrath of the Lord turned from him, so as not to destroy them completely; moreover, conditions were good in Judah>>* (2 Chronicles 12:12), which is just one instance where Scripture shows God's mercy. Yet on those who do not repent then God's wrath will be poured out upon them: *<<Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and by him the rocks are broken in pieces>>* (Nahum 1:6), with further counsel from the prophets: *<<Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the Lord's wrath>>* (Zephaniah 2:3). The warning to all is that this is not just something from the OT, but for now and a time yet to come: *<<Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire>>* (Revelation 20:11-15), and those who choose to believe the OT God was a wrathful, bad-tempered God should reflect that the one sitting

on the throne will be Christ and the eternal punishment just as damning for those who choose not to serve God in this life.

⁸ Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

Matthew 3:8

Bear fruit indicates coming to faith requires a productive outworking of the faith. Those who choose to undergo a baptism of repentance should then see a natural outworking of their faith in God through their daily lifestyle choices and actions. Whether this is reflected in their giving of alms, practical help for others, or their attitude toward their neighbour, depends on their personal circumstances, but repentance calls for a change in everyone who asks for and receives the grace and mercy of God.

John's repentance refers not to a regular turning from sin after a specific act but to a once-for-all repentance, the kind of turning from an old way of life to a new way, similar to that which Jews associated with Gentiles' converting to Judaism. Such is the grace and mercy of God that: *<<If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness>>* (1 John 1:9).

True repentance is costly: the Kingdom demands a response, a radical decision: *<<I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect>>* (Romans 12:1-2). Nominalism is the curse of modern western Christianity. True faith requires real commitment.

⁹ Do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

Matthew 3:9

Being a descendant of Abraham was a badge of honour for all Jews, for it meant that they were covenantal recipients of God's promises made to their ancestor. Since Abraham was specifically called by God: *<<You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham>>* (Nehemiah 9:7), those descended from him believed they were called through him too. John is warning these people not to rely on their heritage or birthright, something that was not new but was often conveniently forgotten: *<<You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities>>* (Amos 3:2), and: *<<Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?>>* (Amos 9:7).

That God has the power to raise up children to Abraham from inanimate objects like stones is not intended to show the power of God but to indicate to these people that there is more to serving God than having a biological link to Abraham. There may be wordplay here as the Aramaic words for children and stones that

John would have originally used are very similar. Anyway, John's symbolism should not have been obscure for God had previously used stones to symbolise his people in: *<<And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. He rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel>> (Exodus 24:4), and: <<Those twelve stones, which they had taken out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal, saying to the Israelites, 'When your children ask their parents in time to come, "What do these stones mean? then you shall let your children know, "Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground">> (Joshua 4:20-21).*

There has to be a spiritual link as well, which is why Gentiles can now have the same access to the promises made to Abraham, by coming to God through Jesus Christ. Being a child of Abraham is the same as being a child of God through the covenantal promises, now available to all people everywhere: *<<But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God>> (John 1:12-13), and: <<Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me>> (John 14:6).*

John's challenge to the Jews who believed they had a promise of salvation simply through their heritage can be easily translated into the problem that faces so many today who believe they are saved because they once said the believer's prayer or they attend a church every Sunday, just as their parents did. Salvation requires personal commitment and calls for the believer to persevere in their faith, not just to drift through life unaware of what it truly means to be a disciple of Christ.

This passage can teach so much along with other Scriptures as to how a disciple should view their faith and trust in God, for He can still draw disciples out of the stones: *<<Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug>> (Isaiah 51:1), <<For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ>> (1 Corinthians 10:4b).*

¹⁰ Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Matthew 3:10

Jesus too would use the analogy of cutting down plants that do not bear fruit for God: *<<Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down">> (Luke 13:6-9), where Jesus, as the gardener, gives a second chance to enable everyone to turn to God, and: <<I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a*

branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned>> (John 15:5-6), which shows what will happen to those who do not choose to stay in Christ, or even come to him in the first place. This had been intimated by the prophet long ago: <<*Which among the trees of Eden was like you in glory and in greatness? Now you shall be brought down with the trees of Eden to the world below; you shall lie among the uncircumcised, with those who are killed by the sword. This is Pharaoh and all his horde, says the Lord God*>> (Ezekiel 31:18).

¹¹ 'I baptise you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Matthew 3:11

One who is coming after me expresses strong messianic expectation. It also endorses the understanding that he was the Lord's messenger spoken of by the prophet Malachi.

Is more powerful than I. John announces the nearness of the Kingdom, but the Coming One will arrive with the power of God to inaugurate messianic rule. The announcement in no way diminishes John's role but actually adds status to his authenticity and servanthood. All leaders need to admit their reliance on Christ and therefore his greater power, even if, like John, they are themselves filled with the Holy Spirit.

I am not worthy to carry his sandals. As a prophet John would have had a special anointing as a servant of God and would have been held in high esteem, and of whom Jesus himself would say: <<*I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John*>> (Luke 7:28a), yet he clearly recognised just how wide the gap is between even the best of human beings and the incarnate God. Even John's example here does not begin to compare the difference between mortal man and God. This makes it all the more unfathomable why: <<*The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood*>> (John 1:14a The Message). The only possible answer is true love.

As already indicated, it is good for church leaders to recognise and publically confess to being just as inferior to Christ, for to do so not only brings glory to him but it enhances, empowers and strengthens their own position of authority through acknowledgement of weakness, as Paul himself had stated: <<*Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me*>> (2 Corinthians 12:8-9).

Baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. John's water baptism will be superseded by the baptism associated with the Coming One. The same Greek construction using the verb *baptizō*, en, i.e. in, joined to the dative of *pneuma*, i.e. Spirit, is used here as in the other six 'baptism in the Holy Spirit' passages in the NT: <<*I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit*>> (Mark 1:8), <<*John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to*

untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire>> (Luke 3:16), <<*I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptise with water said to me, “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit”*>> (John 1:33), <<*While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. ‘This’, he said, ‘is what you have heard from me; for John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now’*>> (Acts 1:4-5), <<*And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, “John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit”*>> (Acts 11:16), and: <<*For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit*>> (1 Corinthians 12:13), and here it seems clearly to refer to the cleansing and empowering work that the Holy Spirit does in a new convert at the point of conversion. Baptism is used metaphorically here to refer to the Spirit’s work within the believer to unite him or her to the body of Christ, which is also the corporate body of believers.

Those who repent and trust in him will receive the blessing of the Holy Spirit: <<*Then afterwards 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. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit*>> (Joel 2:28-29), which Peter quoted from at Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2:16-21, while the unrepentant will receive the judgment of eternal fire, and even the repentant may undergo a purifying fire.

Although Matthew clearly accepts John as a credible and reliable witness, he makes no comment on the fact that the baptism with the Holy Spirit would be a feature of Christ’s First Coming, while the baptism of fire was that of his Second Coming in judgement.

Fire can represent both the cleansing and testing process of Christ: <<*But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap*>> (Malachi 3:2), which is part of the testing process: <<*In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed*>> (1 Peter 1:6-7); and the aspect that is linked to final judgement: <<*the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done*>> (1 Corinthians 3:13), <<*But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgement and destruction of the godless*>> (2 Peter 3:7), and: <<*Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire*>> (Jude 7); <<*for indeed our God is a consuming fire*>> (Hebrews 12:29). Jesus confirmed: <<*I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!*>> (Luke 12:49).

¹² His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

Matthew 3:12

A winnowing-fork was an implement used to separate the wheat from the chaff: <<Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing-floor>> (Ruth 3:2), but here it is used figuratively for the separation of the repentant from the unrepentant.

Clear his threshing-floor refers to the world: <<Do you not say, "Four months more, then comes the harvest"? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together>> (John 4:35-36), and his final harvest: <<Another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to the one who sat on the cloud, 'Use your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is fully ripe.' So the one who sat on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was reaped. Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle>> (Revelation 14:15-17). However, the harvest has begun. It is used with a similar interpretation by the prophet: <<I have winnowed them with a winnowing-fork in the gates of the land; I have bereaved them, I have destroyed my people; they did not turn from their ways>> (Jeremiah 15:7).

Gather his wheat refers to those who will spend eternity in the presence of God the Father, whereas the chaff he will burn refers to those who do not come to saving faith. Many of the Jews believed in the judgement to come but generally accepted it would be for the wicked in the world who would be judged and not everyone, especially not them. That judgement for the unsaved, whether they are good or bad people, will be with unquenchable fire, clearly indicates there will be no second chances, contrary to the teaching of some.

This imagery of chaff and burning with fire was not new in the way unbelievers and unrepentant sinners would be treated at the time of judgement, for it was common practice with chaff to toss it into the air so the lighter chaff was blown away and the heavier waste that was suitable for fuel could be gathered and burned: <<The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away>> (Psalm 1:4), <<The nations roar like the roaring of many waters, but he will rebuke them, and they will flee far away, chased like chaff on the mountains before the wind and whirling dust before the storm>> (Isaiah 17:14), and: <<Therefore they shall be like the morning mist or like the dew that goes away early, like chaff that swirls from the threshing-floor or like smoke from a window>> (Hosea 13:3).

II.b Matthew 3:13-17 - The Baptism of Jesus

This is a brief account of the most remarkable occasion. God incarnate, the only pure and perfect man to have ever existed, submitted himself in all humility to a public baptism of repentance, in order to fulfil all righteousness.

Although Jesus alone did not need John's baptism, for he was the giver of the true baptism (vv.11), he submitted to it to fulfil God's plan (vv.14-15). In a traditional Mediterranean culture, where society stressed honour and shame, Jesus relinquished his rightful honour to embrace the shame of others.

After Jesus' public act of humility, God publicly honours Jesus as his own Son (vv.16-17); that is, as the mightier One whose coming was to bestow the Spirit as John had prophesied (vv.11-12).

In essence, this marks the start of his earthly ministry, although he would still need to undergo a period of 40 days of testing in the wilderness, and it is generally believed that John the Baptist continued in his work for up to a further year before Jesus started to teach in earnest. However, for Peter it started here: *<<So one of the men who have accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us – one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection>>* (Acts 1:21-22).

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptised by him.

Matthew 3:13

The precise location of Jesus' baptism is disputed, and today competing venues vie for visitors. The traditional baptism site is Qasr el-Yahud, on the western bank of the Jordan River.



The traditional baptism site is Qasr el-Yahud just north of The Dead Sea

Then Jesus came from Galilee. The synoptic Gospels portray Jesus as being in Judæa only on this occasion and his subsequent testing by the devil until the final week of his ministry, whereas John shows him to be a frequent visitor to Jerusalem, especially for the festivals. It may have been that Jesus stayed in the region for several months before returning to Galilee.

However, the scene might instead be identified with Bethany across, i.e. on the eastern side of, the Jordan as noted in: <<*This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptising*>> (John 1:28), although this text may imply that John had baptised Jesus earlier and perhaps in a different locale.

Indications are that John baptised people in more than one location: <<*He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*>> (Luke 3:3), <<*John also was baptising at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptised*>> (John 3:23), and: <<*He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptising earlier, and he remained there*>> (John 10:40).

¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?’

Matthew 3:14

Jesus went into the desert to be baptised by John, but John would have prevented him, because he knew Jesus’ identity, not as his cousin for they had never met before this moment: <<*I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptise with water said to me, “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit.” And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God*>> (John 1:33-35), but as the mightier one who brings messianic baptism. While still a foetus in his mother’s womb, John’s spirit had recognised Jesus’ superiority and purpose, showing some kind of spiritual recognition at that level: <<*When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb’*>> (Luke 1:41-42).

I need to be baptised by you. John was born of righteous parents: <<*In the days of King Herod of Judæa, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord*>> (Luke 1:5-6), yet he was still a fallen human being with imputed sin from Adam and needed to come to repentance before the God that stood beside him. Everyone needs to come to Christ and the more righteous the person, the more they understand that need.

Do you come to me? This simple question is reminiscent of the reaction of John’s mother Elizabeth when Jesus’ mother Mary visited her: <<*And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?*>> (Luke 1:43).

¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.’ Then he consented.

Matthew 3:15

It is proper for us, to fulfil all righteousness. Jesus’ baptism inaugurates his ministry and fulfils God’s saving activity prophesied throughout the OT, culminating with his death on the Cross: <<*I myself did not know him; but I came*

baptising with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.’ And John testified, ‘I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him>> (John 1:31-32). In so doing, Jesus also endorses John’s ministry and message, linking his mission to John’s. Although he needed no repentance or cleansing, Jesus identifies with the sinful people he came to save through his substitutionary life and death: <<For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God>> (2 Corinthians 5:21).

That Jesus should undergo this baptism shows his willingness to undertake a public display of repentance on behalf of others, just as he would later die in a similar substitutionary manner, just as public, more honouring and honourable, and excruciatingly painful. It was also a true sign of humility that provides a lesson for all to learn.

¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptised, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

Matthew 3:16

He came up from the water. The natural translation from the Greek would seem to indicate that Jesus had been submerged in the river, supporting the argument of those who propose that method of baptism. Those who support sprinkling water believe this means that Jesus was ascending the river bank.

Suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw portrays the drama that was unfolding at this remarkable scene. That he saw is taken by some that the vision was personal to Jesus and the other witnesses to the baptism were not aware of it. However, John had witnessed the Spirit coming down on him as already noted and v.17 indicates that God was speaking to the witnesses there rather than to Jesus.

No one knows for sure where the location of heaven is or how it is accessed. As humans, we are mostly constrained within a 3D world but science knows of at least 12, some say more. It appears most likely that heaven exists in a dimension that is not normally accessible to humans. Here, some form of portal seems to have been opened to allow Jesus, at least, to view heaven. Others have witnessed similar scenes, such as Stephen shortly before his martyrdom: <<‘Look,’ he said, ‘I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’>> (Acts 7:56), Peter in a vision: <<He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners>> (Acts 10:11), and it was revealed to John: <<After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this’>> (Revelation 4:1).

The Spirit of God anoints Jesus as Israel’s King and Messiah, commissioning him as God’s righteous servant: <<Here is 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>> (Isaiah 42:1). This was an event that was long prophesied: <<The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and

understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord>> (Isaiah 11:2).

Like a dove. This simile does not mean that the Spirit actually assumed the form of a dove but it does indicate a bodily form of something like a dove. It was probably ephemeral. The royal bird of Scripture is the eagle that has a mighty presence but it is also a bird of prey. Jesus as the Christ of God is meek in Spirit, mild and gentle in his heart, with compassion for all people: *<<For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light>> (Matthew 11:30)*, thus the dove is a more fitting image: *<<His eyes are like doves beside springs of water, bathed in milk, fitly set>> (Song 5:12).*

Scholars offer several reasons why the Spirit should appear like a dove. One: *<<Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him. He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days, and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him any more>> (Genesis 8:8-12)*, probably provides the most suitable background, where the dove appears as the harbinger of the new world after the flood, which other early Christian literature employs as a prototype of the coming age: *<<For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark>> (Matthew 24:38)*, *<<who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ>> (1 Peter 3:20-21)*, and: *<<They deliberately ignore this fact, that by the word of God heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water and by means of water, through which the world of that time was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgement and destruction of the godless>> (2 Peter 3:5-7)*. Jesus is the inaugurator of the kingdom era that John has been proclaiming.

¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’

Matthew 3:17

The voice from heaven confirms the eternally existing relationship of divine love that the Son and Father share, as well as Jesus’ identity as the messianic Son of God: *<<I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you>> (Psalm 2:7)*. God had spoken audibly to his people before: *<<Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice>> (Deuteronomy 4:12).*

The Gospels show that three voices: Scripture, a prophetic voice in the wilderness and the heavenly voice; all attest to Jesus' identity. The heavenly voice alone would have been inadequate, but here it confirms the witness of Scripture and a prophet. Jesus is not a mere prophet but the subject of other prophets' messages.

This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased seems to indicate that God was speaking directly to those witnessing this even, whereas the other two synoptic Gospels indicate he was speaking directly to Jesus: <<*And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'*>> (Mark 1:11), and: <<*Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'*>> (Luke 3:21-22). Jesus had not yet called his first disciples, although it is likely that John and Andrew would have been among the witnesses, as they had been disciples of John the Baptist until the arrival of Jesus. Andrew is confirmed by: <<*The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother*>> (John 1:35-40), and John's presence is implicit in his style of writing in his overall Gospel account. Peter also may have been there as Andrew had introduced him to Jesus prior to his calling: <<*He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter)*>> (John 1:42).

God rightly gives honour to the Son, for good reason: <<*After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you'*>> (John 17:1). **Although in many contemporary circles worship properly exhorts and encourages the people of God:** <<*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God*>> (Colossians 3:16), there is also a need for the kind of worship that tells Jesus just how great he is, praising him for what he has done and for who he is: <<*Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness!*>> (Psalm 150:2). **Giving glory to Christ is giving glory to God.**

This beloved Son is the triumphant messianic King, yet he is also the humble servant into whose hands the Father is well pleased to place the mission to bring salvation to the nations: <<*Here is 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. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching*>> (Isaiah 42:1-4).

God would again give his affirmation to the work of his beloved Son at his transfiguration: <<*While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!'*>> (Matthew 17:5), <<*Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!'*>> (Mark 9:7), and: <<*While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!'*>> (Luke 9:34-35), which was clearly intended for the three apostles who were attending him on that occasion to hear: Peter, James and John. Peter provides further confirmation of the event: <<*For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'* We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain>> (2 Peter 1:17-18).

A voice reveals Jesus as the Son: <<*I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth*>> (Psalm 89:27), who learned everything from his Father: <<*then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always*>> (Proverbs 8:30), thus obedient to the point of death, who willingly divested himself of his proper honour by identifying with his people in baptism and death. He is the unique Son of God who portrays the very Spirit and character of his Father in heaven: <<*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation*>> (Colossians 1:15), and: <<*He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high*>> (Hebrews 1:3).

Disciples, who so often trifle with obedience in the smallest matters, for example, the discipline of their thoughts or words for God's honour, are shamed by their Lord's obedience. May they worship him so intensely that his desires become their own and they, like their Lord, become obedient servants with whom the Father is well pleased.