

# **BaptistWay Press® Adult Online Bible Commentary**

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## **Studies in *The Gospel of Matthew: A Primer for Discipleship***

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Lesson Two

### **God's Beloved Son, Baptized by John**

#### ***Focal Text***

Matthew 3

#### ***Background***

Matthew 3

#### ***Main Idea***

Jesus' baptism by John showed Jesus' identification with John's call to genuine repentance in preparation for God's kingdom and brought God's affirmation of Jesus as his beloved Son.

#### ***Question to Explore***

What response does Jesus' baptism call for from his disciples?

#### ***Quick Read***

Disciples make God their King every day.

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### ***Commentary***

Years ago, a machinist at Ford Motor Company in Detroit became a Christian and was baptized. He took his baptism seriously. He had been stealing parts and tools from Ford for years. According to the story, the morning after his baptism he took all the stolen parts and tools back to his boss. He explained his situation and his recent conversion and baptism, and asked for forgiveness.

This response by an employee was without precedent. Henry Ford was visiting a European plant at the time, but he was cabled concerning the details of this matter. His response was requested. Mr. Ford immediately returned a cable with his decision: "Dam up the Detroit River, and baptize the entire city."

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Jesus went even further. In his Great Commission he ordered his church to baptize “*all nations*” (Matthew 28:19, italics added for emphasis). Why? Because baptism is an external symbol of an internal submission to God as our King. Such a commitment is at the heart of discipleship, and is vital for Christians long after their baptism was conducted.

You may have surrendered your body physically to baptism years ago. When last did you surrender your life to God as your King?

### **Choose God to be your King (3:1-6)**

Our text begins: “In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea” (Matt. 3:1). “In those days” refers to the nearly thirty years Jesus spent in Nazareth and links the previous narrative to the present text. “Came” translates *paraginetai*, meaning *to appear suddenly*. We might say that he *burst on the scene*.

#### *Meet John*

“John” means *Yahweh is gracious*. “Baptist” is literally *one baptizing or baptizer*. We have given him the name “John the Baptist” by virtue of his most noted activity. “Preaching” translates *kerysso*, which means *to announce or declare*.

The “Desert of Judea” was the wilderness area around the Dead Sea. It is honeycombed with caves, several of which were found in 1947 to contain the Dead Sea Scrolls. Here individuals and small communities lived apart from society, separated to the service of God in a kind of monastic lifestyle. From the time he was a child, John “lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel” (Luke 1:80).

What do we know about John? Let’s gather the biblical facts regarding this fascinating person. He was related to Jesus (Luke 1:36), perhaps as cousins. His birth was announced by an angel (Luke 1:11-20). At his birth he was set apart by his parents as a Nazirite (Luke 1:15; see Numbers 6:2-3); as a result, he grew up in the desert (Luke 1:80). He identified Jesus as the Messiah (John 1:29-36), and exalted him (John 3:25-36) by his witness (John 5:33).

John baptized Jesus (Matt. 3:13-16), but later came to doubt him (11:2-6). Many identified him with Elijah (11:13-14). After he chastised Herod for adultery (Mark 6:17-18), he was imprisoned (Matt. 4:12) and beheaded (14:3-12). Jesus paid John the highest compliment: “I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist” (11:11).

The only information we have about him outside the New Testament comes from Josephus, the first-century A.D. Jewish historian:

Now, some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist; for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only], but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness. Now, when [many] others came in crowds about him, for they were greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise), thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it should be too late. Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death. Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God's displeasure against him.<sup>1</sup>

*Observe his ministry*

John the Baptist's message was bold and urgent: "saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near'" (Matt. 3:2). John was "saying"—the syntax indicates repeated and consistent delivery of a message. "Repent" translates *metanoete*, meaning *a change of mind that results in a change of life*. Why were his hearers required to change their ways? Because "the kingdom of heaven is near." What is this "kingdom"?

"Kingdom" translates *basileia*, meaning *rule, reign, realm*." "Of heaven" indicates that this kingdom belongs to the realm of heaven and thus of God. "Near" translates *engizo*, meaning *drawing near or approaching*. As God is king in heaven, so he is coming to be king on earth. If a messenger in medieval France were to announce that *the kingdom of Britain is near*, he would mean that the British king was coming to extend his rule on French soil.

Jesus gave us the most succinct definition of the kingdom of God when he taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (6:10). God's kingdom comes whenever and wherever God's will is done. When we make God our King by obeying his word and will, we live in his kingdom and extend his reign on earth.

Matthew, writing to persuade his Jewish audience that Jesus is their Messiah, never missed an opportunity to demonstrate ways that his Lord fulfilled Old Testament prophecy. Here is an example: "This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

‘A voice of one calling in the desert, “Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him”’ (Matt. 3:3).

“Prepare” translates *hetoimazo*, meaning *to make ready, to get everything in readiness*. “Lord” renders *kyrios*, meaning *king*, a term typically reserved for the Roman emperor. Messengers were typically sent ahead of a king to announce his coming and to make all necessary preparations. Where roads were obstructed, they were cleared; where they were crooked, they were made “straight.” *Roll out the red carpet for him* catches the sense of John’s message.

Moses had predicted such a prophet: “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him” (Deuteronomy 18:18). Matthew substantiated John’s ministry by quoting Isaiah 40:3, a connection made by all four Gospels (see Mark 1:2-3; Luke 3:4-6; John 1:23). The original context of Isaiah’s prophecy referred to highway construction workers who were called to clear the desert roads for the return of the Lord as his people returned from Babylonian captivity in 537 B.C. Now John fulfilled that ministry by calling the people to prepare spiritually for the coming of their Lord and King.

Everything about John the Baptist’s ministry was intentional, beginning with his clothing and diet: “John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey” (Matt. 3:4). Jews typically wore an undergarment covered by an outer cloak. This cloak was their protection from the elements; when they slept out at night, it was their bedding. It was a square piece of fabric, with holes for the head and arms, bound around the waist with a belt. “Camel’s hair” made a coarse but durable and effective cloak; a “leather belt” was the most common kind.

In a day when many people wore embroidered cloaks and jeweled belts, John wore the clothes of a common laborer. His appearance reminded the people of Elijah, the prophet who wore “a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist” (2 Kings 1:8). John’s appearance was another way he fulfilled the Lord’s promise: “See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse” (Malachi 4:5-6).

John’s diet was equally austere: “His food was locusts and wild honey” (Matt. 3:4). “Locusts” translates *akris*, referring to grasshoppers or locusts. These desert insects are still eaten by Bedouin today—they are roasted over an open flame, boiled, or baked. “Wild honey” occurred naturally in the desert and made a good source of energy and vitamins. He ate the simplest of foods, identifying with the commoners of his day as he called the nation to their King.

*Respond to his message*

John's message and ministry were extremely effective: "People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan" (Matt. 3:5). Jerusalem was the capital of Israel, of course, and the home of the wealthiest and most influential people in the nation. "All Judea" describes the region in which Jerusalem was situated, something like its *county* or *state*. "The whole region of the Jordan" identifies the Jordan River valley, running from the Dead Sea north into Samaria. Matthew's description includes people from every walk of life and strata of civilization.

They did not come merely to see and hear this unusual messenger, but to respond to his message: "Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River" (3:6). "Confessing" renders *exomologeō*, meaning *to acknowledge* or *admit*. As their baptism was public, we can assume that their confession was public as well.

Baptism (from the Greek *baptizo*, meaning *to immerse*) was a custom predating John. Gentiles immersed themselves in water when they became Jews. Jews took ritual baths for purification purposes before coming to certain functions at the temple. But John's baptism was different: it required repentance and symbolized the forgiveness of sins.

Baptism did not produce such forgiveness—it pictured it. Burial under water was the symbol of burying the old person and raising up the new. In the same way, Paul taught that we are "buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Romans 6:4).

*Why should Christians be baptized?*

Christian denominations vary widely in their understanding of baptism and its significance. The Catholic tradition views baptism as the first sacrament children receive, a step by which they begin their journey in the Christian faith. Some Protestant traditions similarly view infant baptism as an act of faith on the part of believing parents, a kind of New Testament circumcision.

Churches who baptize believers by immersion do so for the following reasons. First, we view baptism as an act of obedience. Jesus commanded us to baptize every person who becomes his disciple. The early church followed this command very carefully, baptizing those who became Christians at Pentecost (Acts 2:41) and those who trusted Christ as a result of personal witnessing (Acts 8:38). Baptism does not make us Christians, but it is a very important response to God's call to obedience. And it is a call only believers can answer.

Second, baptism is an act of witness. By baptism we tell others of our new life in Jesus Christ. Again, baptism does not create this life; the water does not wash away our sins, and neither must we be baptized to be saved. Rather, baptism shows others that we have

already received this salvation. In the act of immersion, we are laid under water to symbolize the burial of the *old person* we were before trusting Christ as Lord. We are then raised out of the water to symbolize the resurrection of the *new person* we are now in Christ. This symbolism is best portrayed by the immersion of those who have trusted Jesus personally.

Traditions that practice infant baptism do so to dedicate children to God upon the faith of their parents. However, the only baptisms described in the New Testament involved people who had come to personal faith in Christ as Lord. And so churches that practice the immersion of Christians believe they are continuing the New Testament model. In the churches I have served as pastor, I explained to those who were baptized as infants that their immersion as a believer in no way invalidates the faith their parents demonstrated in baptizing their child. Rather, it completes their dedication as the person makes public his or her own faith commitment.

Now John's ministry continues through Matthew's inspired narrative. As John the Baptist called the people of his day to prepare for their King, so John the Baptist calls us to make the Coming One our Lord. And John the Baptist invites us to continue his ministry through our own.

Great people plant trees they'll never sit under. In a very real way, we are all the fruit of John's ministry to his King.

### **Serve God as your King (3:7-12)**

God is our King to the degree that we obey him, whether we want to or not. There will be times when such service will be easy, and times when it will be very challenging. What comes next is an example of the latter: "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?'" (Matt. 3:7).

To understand the courage of John's response, it is essential that we know the significance of "Pharisees and Sadducees." When the Greek Empire displaced the Persians (332 B.C.) and attempted its Hellenization of Judea, opposition arose from a party known as the *Hasidim* (meaning *pious ones*). These laymen were champions of orthodox religion and repudiated all things Gentile. They evolved into the party known as "Pharisees" (meaning *separated ones*). They accepted both the written Scriptures and the teachings of the rabbis, believed in an afterlife, and focused on legalism and tradition.

The Pharisees were the spiritual athletes of their day, much respected for their zeal and legalistic sacrifice. The Sadducees were a very different force in first-century Judaism. The high priest and his political cronies had embraced the Greek leaders and their culture

and evolved into the “Sadducees.” They accepted only the written text, rejected the existence of afterlife or angels, and were extremely involved in politics.

While both groups were viewed as significant religious authorities, John knew their hearts and motives. “Brood of vipers” (literally *offspring of vipers*) was an extremely significant deprecation. Ancient tradition held that vipers were snakes that ate their way out of their mothers, killing them in the process. John’s metaphor was meant to indicate that these religious leaders were *killing* the One they claimed as their Father. As snakes would flee a field on fire, so they should flee the coming “wrath” (*orge*, meaning *anger, punishment*).

And they should “produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt. 3:8), literally *fruit that is the appropriate result of repentance*. Jesus warned us:

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them (7:15-20).

John knew their hearts: “And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham” (3:9). Their religious pedigree as children of Abraham (pure-blooded Hebrews) was not enough, and neither were their elevated positions in society.

Their repentance was urgent: “The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire” (3:10). Every time the Hebrew Bible uses the metaphor of a tree cut down or burned, it refers to God’s judgment against a nation (Ezekiel 31:12-18; Daniel 4:23; Jeremiah 11:16). By cutting the tree at its roots, the farmer would destroy it so that it had no chance to regenerate. When it was “thrown into the fire,” it was totally destroyed.

John continued his warning: “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matt. 3:11). “I” is emphatic, literally rendered *I indeed*. “I baptize you with water for repentance” does not mean that water baptism produces repentance or substitutes for it, but that it serves as an external symbol of an internal reality.

“Whose sandals I am not fit to carry” points to a custom in Jesus’ day by which only slaves could be made to handle the sandals of another (see John 13, where Jesus

performed a slave's task by washing his disciples' feet). John meant that he was lower than a slave in relation to the One coming. He would baptize his followers "with the Holy Spirit and with fire," a prediction that was fulfilled at Pentecost (see Acts 2:3-4).

There was no time to waste, for "his winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matt. 3:12). When grain was harvested, it was then threshed by oxen or other animals, a process that separated the grain from the husks. A "winnowing fork" was then used to toss both wheat and husks into the air; the heavier wheat would fall to the floor, while the lighter husks would be blown away. If the farmer had his winnowing fork in hand, this meant that the separation between wheat and chaff was about to begin. He would soon sweep the chaff together and throw it into the "unquenchable fire."

The Jews expected such judgment to come against the Gentiles. John shocked them with his warning that this judgment would come against all who do not bear the fruit God requires. But to the faithful of God, the promise that the wheat would be protected and rewarded was good news.

We show that God is our King when we serve him. We serve him by acting in ways that honor him and obey his word. Our spiritual heritage or status carries no significance with the Lord. It is vital that we submit our lives to his service today, for we are one day closer to his judgment than ever before.

### ***Please God as your King (3:13-17)***

The best way to choose and serve God as our King is to measure success by what pleases him. Ask of every thought, word, and action, *Will this please my Lord?* As Jesus lived his life to please his Father, so Jesus empowers and directs us to do the same.

Our text continues: "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John" (Matt. 3:13). Why would Jesus need to participate in John's baptism? He had never sinned (2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15; 7:26; 1 John 3:5). The Baptizer had the same question: "But John tried to deter him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'" (Matt. 3:14). John was the sinner, not Jesus.

Our Lord's response is puzzling at first: "Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.' Then John consented" (3:15). Jesus meant that he would be baptized to identify with all who were coming to God in repentance, affirming and endorsing the Kingdom movement begun by John. "To fulfill all righteousness" means *to do everything God requires*.

The larger purpose behind Jesus' baptism was then revealed: "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw



the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him" (3:16). His baptism was by immersion, for he "went up out of the water." While he was still in the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit descended on him "like a dove." The Greek could mean that the Spirit took the visible form of a dove, but more likely means that the Spirit descended as a dove descends. At creation, "the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters" (Genesis 1:2) as a bird hovers over her nest.

In this same moment, "a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased'" (Matt. 3:17). This statement combined two significant Old Testament quotations. "This is my Son" is taken from Psalm 2:7: "I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father.'" Every Jewish teacher believed that this psalm would be fulfilled by the Messiah when he came.

"With him I am well pleased" comes from Isaiah 42:1: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations." This verse begins the Suffering Servant passages in Isaiah, which continue through Isaiah 53. Taken together, they pointed to the sufferings Jesus would face, culminating with the cross. He would be the Messiah of the people, but he would conquer their sin by dying for them. The Father would repeat this affirmation at the Mount of Transfiguration: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matt. 17:5).

The appearance of the Spirit and the voice of the Father together constituted the two public witnesses necessary to confirm Jesus' status as the Suffering Messiah. Deuteronomy 19:15 specified that "a matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses"; this requirement would be affirmed later by Jesus (Matt. 18:16).

The Father could say of his Son's humble sacrifice, "I am well pleased." Will God say the same of your service this week?

### **Conclusion**

The kingdom of God is the central theme of Scripture. Making God our King is the most vital, urgent commitment we can make today. God is looking for another John the Baptizer, one who will model submission to his rule and call others to join his realm. Who has made God their King because of you?

I often explain baptism as a wedding ring. Wearing such a ring does not make us married. Neither does the absence of a wedding ring prove that we are not married. Rather, a ring shows the world our marital status. It is a public symbol of a personal commitment. So it is with our baptism as Christians—we tell the world that Jesus is our Lord, inviting others to join our faith. Will your life proclaim that message this week?

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<sup>1</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.5.2. <http://www.ccel.org/j/josephus/works/ant-18.htm>. Accessed 11/22/11.