

Big Bad John 11-02-03

Matthew 3:1-12

Turn with me to Matthew chapter 3 in your Bibles and read along. The sermon today is an introduction to John the Baptist, the man, his mission and his message. Let's read the first few verses. *¹In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea ²and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."* Matt 3:1-2 (NIV)

Luke begins the story before his conception, telling us that his father, Zechariah, was lighting the incense in the Holy Place when the angel Gabriel appeared and told of the coming of John. Like many of God's special servants, Zechariah and Elizabeth weren't likely candidates to have children for they were well along in years. The angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah and said, *"Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. ¹⁴He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. ¹⁶Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous--to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."* Luke 1:13-17 (NIV)

We learn several incredible things about John from this passage. John means 'God is a gracious giver'. He will be great in the sight of the Lord. Jesus confirmed this by saying that he was a shining light (John 5:35), more than a prophet (Matthew 11:9) and that there was none greater born of women (Matthew 11:11). We don't usually think of John as the greatest prophet because we don't see any miracles in his ministry, and we tend to associate that with greatness, but as we go on, you'll see why he was so great.

He would never drink wine. It does not say he was a Nazarite, one who never touches anything from a grapevine and grows out their hair like Samson. He simply would not touch wine or fermented drink. That is immediately followed by the fact that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth. We see that intoxicating drinks can be a type of substitute for the Spirit, and so we call alcohol 'spirits'. (Ephesians 5:18) This is not a prohibition on drinking in moderation, it simply says that John was completely dedicated to the ministry that God had for him. Remember Jesus' vow at the last Supper to not taste wine until He drinks it with us in the Kingdom?

Commented [notes1]: ¹⁸Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.
Ephesians 5:18 (NIV)

Then the angel tells us some exciting predictions. John would turn many people of Israel back to the Lord their God. The religious world of John's day had become so legalistic that there was little if any relationship with God. They had rules about how to keep the rules. Religion was driving people away from God rather than drawing them to God, but Gabriel was predicting that it was about to change.

He also predicted that he would fulfill the prophecy of the last prophet Malachi. (Malachi 4:5-6) The last prophet to speak to Israel had ended his ministry with the prediction the angel quoted. That was 400 years earlier. The people were longing for a word from God to breath life back into their faith. A Jewish saying at the time acknowledged this long period of silence, "There was no voice, nor any that answered." Malachi ended his prophecy with the words Gabriel quoted about John's call. He declared that one day Elijah would turn the hearts of the father's to the children and the children to their fathers. Jesus said that John had come in the spirit of Elijah. The angel adds that he will prepare a people for the Lord.

Commented [notes2]: ⁵"See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.
⁶He 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 (NIV)

As in Jesus case, we only have one line about his youth, "*And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel.*" Luke 1:80 (NIV) I think we can assume from this, and the fact that John's parents were aged when he was born, that his parents died when he was young. Some scholars think that from his message and emphasis on Baptism that he may have stayed in the community in Qumran. I have read that there was in fact a record of a person that was named John who stayed for a time in Qumran. He would have had access to the ancient scrolls there. We cannot be certain that this was the case as John was a fairly common name. That community was focused on the coming of the Messiah and the final battle of the Children of Light and the sons of darkness. They were ascetic in lifestyle and emphasized complete obedience to the law. Ritual cleansing, like baptism, was a daily part of the life of that community. In John's ministry however, we do not see a focus on the details of the law nor does he use baptism in the sense of ritual cleansing. John sees baptism as sign of repentance and preparation for the coming Kingdom.

Imagine this young man growing up out in the desert wilderness. That area of Israel is a harsh barren land of desert shrubs and scorpions. I would imagine this period of solitary time would have sharpened his spiritual ear. It says that he grew strong in spirit, or spiritually strong. Completely dedicated and focused upon God, he developed an ear to hear the Lord speaking to him. Remember at Jesus' baptism he said that the Lord had told him the one on whom the Spirit descended like a dove would be the Messiah. I'm sure he heard many more things from the Spirit.

Like Elijah before him, he wore a camel hair robe. (2 Kings 1:8) This was a rough and not too lovely choice of fur. He would be deeply tanned from living out in the elements. He ate wild honey and locusts, which are probably the pods of carob. Both his dress and food were that of the poor. I wonder if he didn't have a few welts on his face from angry bees whose hives he had robbed.

Now do you see him in your mind? And with penetrating eyes of conviction he yells out God's warning, "REPENT – the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!" (Matthew 1:2) The amazing thing is that the people from all over Judea made the journey out to see him. Not only that, but they responded to this simple, to the point, message. The true preacher is obliterated by his message. People did not see this unsightly man, but they heard his message that pierced their hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit. He had the unanswerable authority that clings to the man that comes out from the presence of God, into the presence of man.

What exactly is he saying? "Repent!" It means to have a change of mind. Change the way you see things. Go from being apathetic about God, to being completely focused on God. Go from being nonchalant about sin to abhorring and turning from it. At this time in Israel, things were fairly prosperous. People enjoyed freedom from war and the increase in trade that Rome had brought. Things weren't perfect, but life was better than it had been in centuries. Reminds me of today. I believe America needs a John the Baptist' type message today. Turn from your way of thinking. Drastically change your mindset. Be convicted and change! Is your heart fixed on this world's pleasure? Here was a man who had none of the world's pleasure and so could say with total conviction that they should not let it drive them.

John pulled no punches and never tried to please man. He told the soldiers not to abuse their power, the tax collectors not to take more than was right, the religious leaders to prove their hearts had changed by their actions, and he told governor Herod Antipas that it wasn't lawful for him to have his brother's wife. He would die for that last declaration, but he would never back down. Diogenes, a first century rabbinical commentator said, "He who never offended anyone never did anyone any good." John did a lot of people good. He was a man's man, uncompromising, unflinching, booming voice full of the Holy Spirit and power. He was the last prophet. (Luke 16:16)

What did he mean that the Kingdom of Heaven was near? If we can gain any insight from Qumran or other rabbinical writing at the time, we would take this to mean that the rule of God was coming. The day was approaching when God would reign again over his people. I do not think that John understood what that meant exactly. The people had the tendency to translate that into a Davidic type of rule, but we now realize it means that Christ would reign in our hearts. The Kingdom of Heaven came in with Jesus and was established with Pentecost. The new covenant was established through the blood of Christ making it possible for every believer to be personally submitted to the King and thus be in the Kingdom of Heaven.

I hope when you read 'Kingdom of Heaven' you don't think off in the future. Matthew uses the expression 31 times in his gospel. It is the same as the Kingdom of God. It is within us, as Jesus taught. (Luke 7:21)

³*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.'" Matthew 3:3 (NIV) Other gospel writers go on to tell the next few verses from Isaiah ⁴Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. ⁵And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."* Isaiah 40:4-5 (NIV)

In the days of Solomon, basalt highways were made so that people would have an easier time on their journeys to the feasts of Israel. Someone in that time wrote that there were three miseries in life, sickness, fasting, and travel. Solomon tried to alleviate the last misery, but traffic and weather would damage the roads. The only time they would be repaired and made smooth was when a letter went out stating

Commented [notes3]: ¹⁶The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it. Luke 16:16 (NIV)

Commented [notes4]: ²¹Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you. Luke 17:21 (KJV)

that the king was coming that way. John is saying, "The King is coming, and you better make the path into your heart a straight and level the road for you are about to see the glory of God. John the Beloved writes that the Word was made flesh and we beheld his glory. (John 1:14) Jesus' life was an expression of the glory of God.

We need to always check to see that our hearts are ready to receive the King, receive His instructions and directions, His rebuke and love. If we are not yielding to the King's commands can we truly say we are a part of His Kingdom? The mountains and valleys in our hearts are the areas in which we do not readily yield to Him. They are the little gods and we are to have no other gods. Fill up the valleys and level the mountains and receive the word of the Lord. Then you will see the glory of the Lord in the world around you!

⁴*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.* ⁵*People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan.* ⁶*Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.* Matthew 3:4-6 (NIV) Why did so many respond? Did John have the right program? Did he preach to their felt needs? Did his headquarters send him the right plan for evangelizing desert regions? Or maybe it was his GQ style of dress? You know it was only one thing. It was the power of the Holy Spirit through the voice of conviction out of a life that lived in obedience to God. Two different men can preach the same message. One message can transform every heart that hears and the other fall flat. What is the difference? One has the power of the Holy Spirit because the messenger is living the message and speaks with conviction. We need for you to pray for the Bible believing pastors that we will be that kind of messenger to the church and to our community.

John was that kind of mouthpiece. Nothing else really mattered to him. He didn't have a great building, or a special advertising campaign. Look at all the things we look to for effectiveness. Did he have a PhD from Jerusalem Theological? No! But he had the one thing that does matter, the power of the Holy Spirit, and all Judea came out to hear him.

When D.L. Moody started preaching everyone told him he just wasn't gifted and had better find another call. He kept on by faith, living and learning the message as he went, and the Holy Spirit empowered his words. The rest is history. Read his messages today, and they are no big deal. That's because you don't catch the power in the words as he spoke them. It's the power that comes from being in the presence of God, not a program or personality!

⁷*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?"* ⁸*Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.* Matthew 3:7-8 (NIV) Like snakes fleeing in front of a range fire, they had come out to observe and criticize while inwardly wondering if they needed to repent themselves. Wrath was coming. Another 40 years and the temple would be leveled by Rome. Here is God's message to the religious, *"Your life should demonstrate that you have had a change of mind."* As we've seen in some of our Bible studies, the religious were absorbed with money

Commented [notes5]: ¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.
John 1:14 (NIV)

making and pride. Not only did they want to be the wealthiest, they wanted to be the most respected spiritually, even while they were extorting the people. John is saying that if their minds have yielded to God's attitudes, then their life will show it. The same could be said to anyone. If our lives have lined up with God's attitudes, we'll love our neighbor as our self. Our life will demonstrate a Christ likeness. That is the fruit of repentance.

⁹And 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. ¹⁰The 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. Matthew 3:9-10 (NIV) The Pharisees immediate response would have been that they were children of Abraham. That was all they thought was really needed. They thought that as long as you descended from Abraham there was no possibility of facing the wrath of God. John is teaching that you may be a Jewish national by birth, but you can't have a heart that is right with God by birth. It doesn't matter if your mother and father were Christians, you only come to saving faith by a personal faith of your own. There are no second-generation Christians. Every Christian is a first-generation Christian. A real relationship will bear good fruit. Jesus used the same wording in John 15. (John 15:2)

¹¹"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. ¹²His 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." Matthew 3:11-12 (NIV)

In Jesus' day the servant or disciple took care of the sandals. John says he is not even fit to be a servant or disciple of the Messiah. It is Jesus who will baptize us in the Holy Spirit and fire. He will immerse us, not in water, but in the Holy Spirit. Under the old covenant, things were purified by fire. (Numbers 31:23) There are a number of opinions as to what this means, but I understand it to mean the process of sanctification. The Holy Spirit fills us and burns off our self-seeking and prideful attitudes and habits. John's baptism said, "I'm sorry God, change the way I see things so that I might receive the Messiah." Jesus' baptism says, "I have died with Christ and am raised with Him to newness of life." That is why those in the New Testament who were baptized by John were rebaptized by Jesus' disciples. (Acts 19:3-5)

What a man this last prophet was! He was introducing us to the Messiah. He was ushering in a new age. Yet, he did it with power and humility, wisdom and purity. Do we still hear his message today? He was saying, "Don't think like the world; change your thinking to line up with God's ways." His life said, "Don't compromise, do what is right! Don't let the luxury of the world seduce you; be open to hear and obey the Holy Spirit." The Kingdom of Heaven is here. Are you in it? Is the King reigning in you?

Commented [notes6]: ²He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. John 15:2 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: ²³and anything else that can withstand fire must be put through the fire, and then it will be clean. But it must also be purified with the water of cleansing. And whatever cannot withstand fire must be put through that water. Numbers 31:23 (NIV)

Commented [notes8]: ³And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism. ⁴Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. ⁵When they heard *this*, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Acts 19:3-5 (KJV)