

The Church of the Servant King

Thursday Night Bible Study

The Gospel of Matthew

(Thurs_Matthew_John the Baptist & Jesus' Baptism)

CHAPTER 3

In between Chapters 2 and 3 approximately thirty years pass. Jesus grew up in relative obscurity, unknown to the world. All of a sudden, in Chapter 3 He seems to arise out of nowhere to begin His public ministry. His parents are not people of means or notoriety. He grew up in Nazareth which was the location of the Roman garrison in northern Galilee. Those who lived there were suspected of compromise with the Romans.

THE PREACHING OF JOHN THE BAPTIST (3:1-12)

1 Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying,

2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

3 For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said,

"THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS,
'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD,
MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT!'"

4 Now John himself had a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.

5 Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan;

6 and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins.

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

8 "Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance;

9 and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham.

10 "The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

11 "As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

12 "His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

We must recall that this passage is set within the context of the Age of Israel. God's program with the nation of Israel consisting of the Jewish race is the divine order for His administration of His revelation to mankind – Jews first, then Gentiles. God's desire was that the nation of Israel, consisting of redeemed, believing Jews, would be God's agents through whom Gentiles would be evangelized and directed to God (Yahweh). From the perspective of a Jew (or even a God-fearing Gentile familiar with Hebrew Scripture) at this point in the First Century A.D., there was no anticipation of a separate dispensation to be intercalated that would temporarily set

aside God's program with Israel as would later occur through the Apostle Paul. (See chart in the **Appendix** – “*Prophetic Horizon – Pre-Pauline Revelation*”).

The idea of “the kingdom of heaven being at hand” was not really all that new of a concept to Jews of the nation of Israel. Hebrew Scriptures are replete with prophetic statements regarding the future, theocratic kingdom of blessing to Israel and the Jews. However, by the 1st Century A.D., the Jews had become self-righteous in their knowledge that they were God's appointed agents to evangelize Gentiles. It was such a problem that they were unconscious of their true spiritual status – genetic children of Abraham, but largely a nation of unredeemed Jews. They clung to their genetic lineage in pride and subconsciously thought they had a free pass into the promised Messianic Kingdom.

It was into this spiritual darkness that a light was about to shine. It was into this spiritual darkness that John the Baptist was sent as a forerunner of this Light. His message to Israel and the Jews was simple.

“Repent” (*metanoeo* – Gr. μετανοεω) – means to change one's thinking and is closely associated with a radical transformation of the entire person. This was something new – a new requirement being proclaimed by this one man in the wilderness and it became a stumbling block to many.

There are many ideas as to the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven/God in Scripture. Each idea is attempting to deal with the following questions among others:

- Is there a difference between the Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of God?
- What exactly was the Kingdom that was offered to the Jews?
- If the Jews rejected the Kingdom Gospel presented by John, Jesus and Jesus' disciples, what is the nature of the Kingdom today?
- Are Church Age believers members of the same Kingdom?

Without conducting an extensive study of the subject of the Kingdom in Scripture, let me summarize a few thoughts on the subject that are relevant.

- The Kingdom of heaven and the Kingdom of God are terms for the same kingdom.
- Both refer to the Messianic kingdom that Jesus would have established had the Jews accepted His offer.
- Sometimes Scripture makes reference to Church Age believers as participants in the kingdom (e.g. Col 1:13).

13 For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son. (Col 1:13)

- I believe that these passages are references to our heavenly status as believers in Jesus Christ (i.e. Eph 1:21; 2:6).

21 Far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. (Eph 1:21)

6 And raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. (Eph 2:6)

- As believers in Jesus Christ, we will rule and reign with Him during the Millennial Kingdom on earth that He establishes at His Second Advent.¹

The phrase “prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight” is from Isaiah 40:3 where Isaiah announces the need to prepare a highway for the return of the Jewish exiles from captivity to their homeland, Israel. In the same manner that roads were repaired, smoothed, straightened and leveled before the arrival of a king, John was preparing a spiritual highway for the coming of Christ.

3 A voice is calling,
 "Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness;
 Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God." (Isa 40:3)

Matthew 3:4-5 – John’s Clothing and Diet

- The clothes of camel’s hair and the leather belt were the clothes of poor people and they established a linkage to Elijah (see 2 Kings 1:8 and Malachi 4:5).
 - 8 They answered him, "He was a hairy man with a leather girdle bound about his loins." And he said, "It is Elijah the Tishbite." (2 Kings 1:8)
 - 5 "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. (Mal 4:5)
- His preaching in the desert of Judea indicates that he came to separate those who would believe from those who were allied with the religious systems of the day.
- Locusts are large grasshoppers which are still eaten in the East.
- John’s diet points to a poor man used to living in the wilderness and it establishes a connection with prophets from centuries earlier.
- Both Elijah and John had ministries that prophesied judgment and in which austere dress and diet were used to confirm their ministries.

Matthew 3:6 – The Baptism of John

- John’s baptism was a religious rite signifying confession of sin and commitment to a holy life in anticipation of the coming Messiah.
- There were two primary uses of baptism during John’s time – 1) ceremonial purification and 2) as a public acknowledgment of repentance (change of mind).
- Baptisms were common in most ancient near Eastern religions and the Jewish religion was no exception.
- Baptism was considered a form of ceremonial purification.
- Not only the priests and other individuals were baptized, but clothing, utensils, and articles of furniture were subjected to ceremonial cleansing. Examples include:
 - Leviticus 8:6 – Moses took Aaron and his sons and washed them with water to symbolize their dedication to the Lord.
 - Exodus 19:10-14 – Moses is commanded to instruct the people to wash their clothes and consecrate themselves (a reference to purification rites) for two days prior to the Lord’s appearance to them at the base of Mt. Sinai.
 - Mark 7:3-4 – Mark explains to his readers in Rome the traditions of the Jews that involved such purification rites.
 - Hebrews 9:6-10 – The writer of Hebrews explains the limitations of the ceremonial rites of the priests under the Law to complete the reconciliation to

¹ This point was developed more fully in our study of the book of Revelation in the Prophecy Series.

- God that was accomplished through Christ. This included “various washings” and other activities that had to be repeated in contrast to the work of Christ.
- Confession of sin was associated with John’s baptism. The reason – confession of sin was commanded by the law as a part of a priest’s duties (Lev 16:21) and as an individual responsibility for wrongs done (Lev 5:5; 26:40; Num 5:6-7; Prov 28:13).
 - Since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, many have tried to link John’s baptism with that of the Qumran community of Essenes. However, their washings were regarded as purifying and were repeated since they were for the purpose of removing ritual uncleanness even though they were related to confession.
 - John’s baptism was unrelated to ceremonial impurity and was most likely a once-only rite. The rabbis used baptism in this manner (i.e. in association with the confession of sins not ceremonial purification) to induct proselytes but never Jews.
 - As far as we know, though baptism itself was not uncommon, the pointed but limited associations placed on John’s baptism stem from the Baptist himself and was not unlike circumcision, which predated Abraham but lacked covenantal significance before his time. Baptisms prior to John were not connected to repentance in anticipation of the fulfillment of covenant blessings in the kingdom.

Matthew 3:7-12 – John Castigates the Unbelieving Religious Types

- The Pharisees and the Sadducees were two prominent groups in Judaism during this period. Both groups claimed to be followers of Judaism, but their beliefs were considerably different. The Pharisees were primarily related to the lay people of Israel. In doctrine, they adhered to not only the Law of Moses and the Scriptures, but they also adhered to a whole body of oral tradition. Their activities were centered in the synagogue. The Sadducees were associated with the priestly caste, for whom worship was centered in the temple. They were extremely conservative and they based their beliefs primarily upon the Pentateuch.
- John sums up the basis of their unbelief in his message. They believed that they, as physical descendants of Abraham, were automatically qualified for the Messiah’s kingdom.
- John correctly understood that belief in Jesus as the coming Messiah was a pre-requisite for entrance into the Kingdom.
- The “wrath to come” that John referred to would have been the tribulation period that would consummate in the Second Advent of the Messiah. This seven year period would have occurred even if Israel had believed. Jesus would have still had to pay the penalty for man’s sin in order to accomplish redemption, reconciliation, propitiation, and justification. The Second Advent will accomplish deliverance for believing Israel and the baptism of fire for unbelieving Jews and Gentiles.
- John used water baptism to identify people with his message. Jesus, the One coming after him, was so much greater that he would unite people to Himself by means of the Holy Spirit.
- John knew that the kingdom to come would be characterized by a great display of the Holy Spirit in the lives of God’s people (see Isa 32:15; 44:3; Ezek 11:19; 36:26; 39:29; Joel 2:28; Mal 3:2-5; Zech 12:10).
- John’s mention of the baptism of the Holy Spirit was a reference to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that would be characteristic of the latter days of the Age of Israel (see Jer 31:31-25 cf. Ezek 36:25-27; 39:29; Joel 2:28).
- John knew nothing of the Church Age and his Scriptural frame of reference included only the timeline shaped by eschatological prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures. John’s predicted baptism with the Holy Spirit that occurred on Pentecost is entirely different than the baptism that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 12:13 wherein the believer is baptized into the body of Christ.

- The baptism of fire is a reference to the judgment that God will pour out upon the unbelieving world at the Second Advent of Christ. Through this baptism, unbelievers will be taken in judgment and believers left to enter into the Millennium (see Mal 4:1 cf. Matt 24:40-41; 25:31-46).
- In the judgment associated with the Second Advent, the “wheat” (believers) are gathered into the “barn” (the Millennial kingdom). On the other hand, the “chaff” (unbelievers) are burned up with an unquenchable fire (a likely reference to the Lake of Fire into which they will be thrown after standing before Christ at the Great White Judgment Throne).

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS (3:13-17)

13 Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him.

14 But John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?"

15 But Jesus answering said to him, "Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he permitted Him.

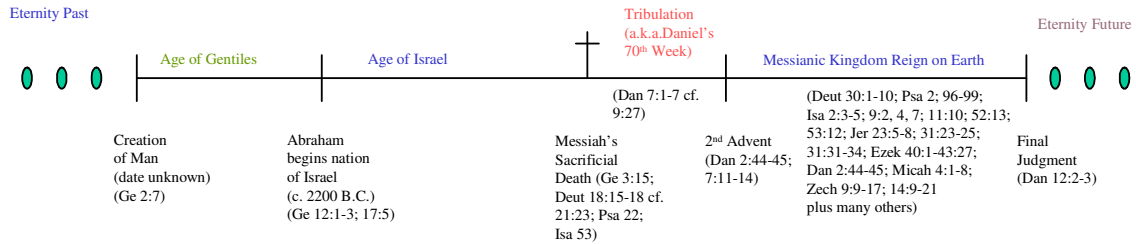
16 After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him,

17 and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased."

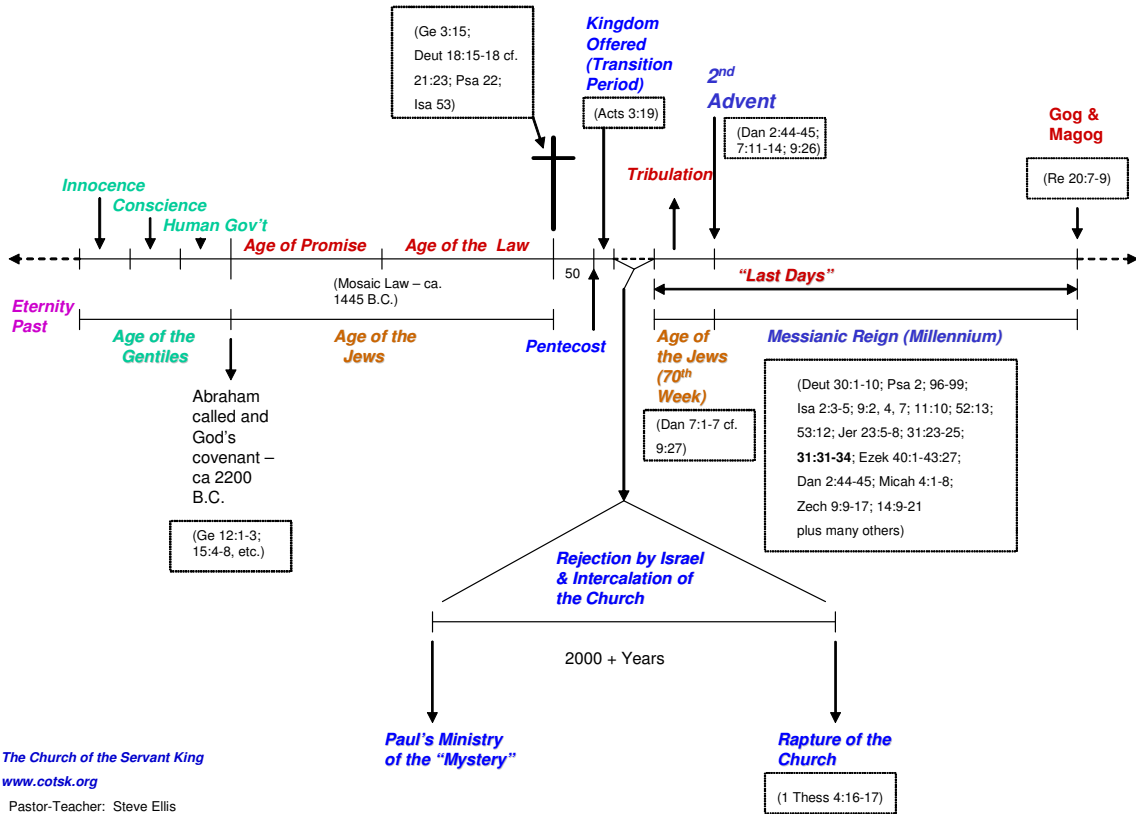
- Only Matthew records John’s opposition to Jesus’ request to be baptized. John recognized that Jesus did not fit the requirements of his (John’s) baptism.
- Jesus was not repenting. He had never sinned (2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15; 7:26; 1 John 3:5).
- The act of baptism is associated with identification. The baptism of Jesus was necessary to identify Him with the Messianic Kingdom and with those who had been baptized in association with repentance in order to enter the Messianic kingdom. Therefore, Jesus’ baptism was for the purpose of identifying Him with the Messianic kingdom and all who would enter it.
- In addition, the Levitical law required that all priests be consecrated at about thirty years of age (Num 4:3; Luke 3:23). The consecration was two-fold – first the washing (baptism), then the anointing (Ex 29:4-7; Lev 8:6-36). Jesus is our eternal priest.
- Jesus’ baptism was authenticated from heaven by the other two members of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit descended upon Him. The voice of the Father in heaven confirmed the divine nature that Christ possessed as the Son of God (these words were repeated on the Mount of Transfiguration – Matt 17:5). These events were in keeping with the prophecy of Isaiah that the Spirit would rest on the Messiah (Isa 11:2).

APPENDIX – Prophetic Horizon – Pre-Pauline Revelation

The Prophetic Timeline from the Viewpoint of
A Believer During Jesus' Public Ministry



A Dispensational Perspective of Human History



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