

MATTHEW

3:1-17

Matthew 3:1-17

Taught by Simeon Forder on Sunday morning, 17th November 2024 @ Deal Christian Fellowship

Reading: Luke 1:57-66

Introduction

Last Sunday morning, in our study of the gospel according to Matthew, we saw him record how wise men (that is, the Magi), came from the East to worship Jesus as King of the Jews. And that greatly unsettled king Herod, who thought *he* was king of the Jews. So much so, in fact, that he slaughtered many innocent boys under 2 years old in an attempt to kill Jesus.

But God, foreknowing this, had not only forewarned the Magi to return home without seeing Herod again, but also told Joseph to take himself, Jesus and Mary to Egypt *because* of all Herod would do. But later in the chapter Matthew then recorded, that with Herod now dead, God told Joseph to return home. And so the family came and settled back in Nazareth, that, as had been prophesied, Jesus would be called a Nazarene.

And those events bring us to the time where Jesus was as much as 5 years old.

Chapter overview of Matthew's gospel

- **Chapters 1-2:** The person of the King
- **Chapters 3-4:16:** The preparation of the King
- **Chapters 4:17-20:** The preaching & programme of the King

- **Chapters 21-28:** The passion & power of the King

But next, as we'll see in chapter 3 this morning, Matthew jumps forward in time around 25 years, to the start of John the Baptist's ministry. And we might wonder; why does he skip so many years? Well, each one of the gospel accounts focusses *primarily* on the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. Indeed, Mark's account *starts* with John the Baptist's ministry, and, aside from noting Jesus was present at creation, John's narrative also begins with John the Baptist. Only Matthew and Luke give additional detail recording Jesus' birth and life before His baptism by John.

So the question to ask is not so much why these two gospel accounts don't record *more* about Jesus' early years on this earth, but why do they record the things they *do*. In the case of Luke's gospel, he tells us, writing in the opening verses:

Luke 1:1-4

Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.

And indeed Luke's orderly account is not only the longest in terms of number of verses and words, but he also records the most detail of these early years, including the announcement, birth, and circumcision of both John and Jesus, plus the angel's declaration of Jesus' birth, the shepherds visit to Him, and later Jesus being presented in the temple, Simeon's blessing, Anna's witness of Him, the annual visits to the temple each passover, and Jesus' questioning of the scholars there when He was 12 years old. Many of those things are unique to his account.

But Matthew notes Jesus' birth for a different reason, because, as mentioned before, he was writing to a Jewish audience to show them that Jesus was their King. That's why he started with Jesus' royal genealogy in chapter 1, then recorded the wise men visiting to *worship* Him as King in chapter 2. And now he jumps to John the Baptist, because he wants to show that Jesus is their Messiah, and so first notes that John the Baptist is the one spoken of by the prophet Malachi, who would prepare the way *for* the Messiah, as written in Malachi 3:1 which says:

Malachi 3:1

"Behold, I send My messenger, And he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, Will suddenly come to His temple, Even the Messenger of the covenant, In whom you delight. Behold, He is coming," Says the LORD of hosts.

And in case you're wondering how we know that the first sentence in this verse is referring to John the Baptist, Matthew records in chapter 11 that Jesus said:

Matthew 11:10

For this is he of whom it is written: Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.'

Overview of chapter three

Overview of chapter three

- **v1-12** — John the Baptist prepares the way
- **v13-17** — John Baptises Jesus

So then, as we move through this chapter we'll first see John the Baptist laying the ground for Jesus the Messiah, the One the Jews had been expecting, not as *a king*, but *the King*. Then, in the final 5 verses we'll see Jesus be baptised by John, and His first recorded words in Matthew's account.

But, before we dig into this chapter, you might be wondering; who was John the Baptist? And why was he not John the Anglican, or John the Methodist. Well, John wasn't called this because of a denomination, but because of his actions (which is a far better thing to be known by, by the way). And he was a man of God who baptised people — in other words he was known as John the baptiser. And we'll come to what baptism is later on this morning.

As for John's background, though, we need to turn to Luke's account that we read from a moment ago — for it is he who tells us about John's parents, Zacharias and Elizabeth; that Zacharias was a priest, and Elizabeth was herself a descendant of Aaron. And he notes that they were unable to have children, but God intervened and provided them a son whom they, in accordance with God's instruction, called John.

And Luke records, that six months after Elizabeth fell pregnant, a blood relative of hers — a young girl named Mary — was *also* visited by the angel Gabriel and told she would give birth to a baby boy, who she should call Jesus. And we read that Mary went to visit Elizabeth, and that at-the-moment which Mary told Elizabeth the wonderful and amazing news that Jesus was going to be born through her, John (yet unborn, though very much considered a baby already) leapt for joy in her womb.

Luke, as we *read*, then goes on to record John's birth, his circumcision, his naming, and that the hand of the Lord was with him. But furthermore, he records the prophecy that his father, Zacharias, spoke following these things, which included these words about John:

Luke 1:76-80

"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins, Through the tender mercy of our God, With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace." So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel.

And we'll see Zacharias' prophecy fulfilled in this chapter in Matthew, as John did just that; preparing the way before Jesus, telling people to repent of their sin. And, as we then work our way through Matthew's account, we'll see further mentions of John; first as he sends some of his disciples to question Jesus in chapter 11, then as Jesus comments on him, and ultimately as John is beheaded in chapter 14.

Chapter three

So, knowing *who* Matthew is talking about — essentially picking up from Malachi chapter 3, which Matthew's audience would have known spoke of a messenger that would precede their Messiah —we read:

Matthew 3:1-2

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

And so John, who we could really consider the last of the Old Testament prophets (in that he preceded Christ), preached. And it's important to note that preaching was as much a role of a prophet as giving prophecy, which we typically think of as revealing the future in advance. Indeed, preaching is *part* of prophecy, as we read the apostle Paul write in 1 Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 14:3

But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men.

And here, John was very much exhorting the people in this region to repent, which a word that is translated from the Greek word `metanoēō` that speaks of changing direction, specifically the direction of your thinking, of your mind. But not in some small way, but to regard your past sin as abhorrent, and for this change of mind to change your actions, that you might walk in a new direction. Repent doesn't merely mean to be sorry.

Now, why was John preaching this? And why was he preaching it now? Well, we read that he said "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!*" — there was an urgency to this, an immediate need, and that was the kingdom of heaven was just around the corner. What was this kingdom of heaven?

Well, the typical Jew at this time was expecting their Messiah would come to rule and reign a physical kingdom on this earth, sat on the throne of David. And they were not entirely wrong, for one day He still will (as John will allude to). But the kingdom of heaven was distinct from that, meaning the rule of heaven over earth, with Jesus as King, sat on the throne of *heaven*.

You see, Matthew has already introduced the readers of his account to Jesus, the King. But a king without a kingdom is not a king at all. And so what follows is the establishment of that kingdom through Jesus' ministry. And John underlines that repentance is a necessary part of becoming part of that kingdom, of becoming subject to Christ as we ought to be.

And Matthew continues, commenting on John the Baptist, the messenger that preceded the king and His kingdom, who was *also* promised beforehand, writing:

Matthew 3:3

For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight." "

And he quotes Isaiah chapter 40:3, which itself says:

Isaiah 40:3

The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the LORD; Make straight in the desert A highway for our God.

Another clear reference to Jesus being God, for the word used for God here is **eĭōhîym**. And again, John was laying the groundwork for the people to turn in repentance and faith to a Saviour who was indeed able to save them, not because of what *they* had done, but because of what *He* had done.

Matthew 3:4

Now John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.

We could joke that dressed like this he could never have been an Anglican! But more seriously, he was dressed much like the prophet Elijah who was described in 2 Kings 1:8 as "A hairy man wearing a leather belt around his waist." And Matthew notes that his diet was made up of locusts and honey, which, I'll be honest, doesn't sound terribly appealing to me, but was nonetheless a clean food according to the law of Moses, as noted in Leviticus 11:22.

This is a picture of a man that, by our standards, we would not think ideal to reach the lost, right? We'd all too easily choose someone who was dressed according to the latest fashion, who lived happily amongst the people he was trying to reach, and was great at connecting with others over a cup of coffee. But no, John the Baptist lived in the wilderness, ate locusts for breakfast, and was dressed in camel hair. As obvious a choice as sending a man in a suit to reach the hippies of the 60s and 70s, as God used Chuck Smith. Those that God calls are those who will hold fast to His Word, and will preach the truth. Not necessarily those, and often not those, who hold to the latest trends.

And when such a man or woman is obedient to God's calling on their lives, God will work through them. And that's what happened with John. We read on:

Matthew 3:5-6

Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptised by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.

So then, he didn't even come to the people, but multitudes of people went to him. And we read that they were baptised. So what was going on? Well, as these individuals inwardly responded to his call to repentance, John took them — as an outward sign of that inward change — and submerged them in the river Jordan, bringing them up out of it again as a public declaration of their repentant heart — that they wanted to turn from their sin, that they wanted to be made clean from it. And we see Matthew note that they did so confessing, that is acknowledging, their sins.

And so this is similar to what we are instructed to do as Christians, being baptised as an outward sign, indeed a public declaration of the inward change that has happened in us, which is not only a that of a repentant heart, but that of faith in the completed work of Jesus on the cross to pay for our sin — that is, Christian baptism is to identify oneself with Christ, symbolic of His death and resurrection, declaring that likewise our old self has been killed off, and we have been raised to new life in Jesus. Which is why Galatians 2:20 is such a fitting verse to read out following baptism.

But Christ had not yet died in man's place, so what John was doing here was calling to repentance, preparing the hearts of these people to receive Christ by faith, following all He was about to do. And this baptism was a public declaration of that repentance.

Matthew 3:7

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

And we might think; "Well, that sounds a bit harsh!". But to do so would be to miss the context of this. For the Pharisees and Sadducees were the spiritual leaders of the day — and the Pharisees were ardent proponents of the law of Moses, but self-righteous and zealous, ready to pounce on anyone. The Sadducees more or less held to the same, and acted the same, but denied the supernatural — from angels, to the resurrection from the dead. That's why they were, sad, you see!

And so, it was a genuine surprise, no doubt, to find these self-righteous leaders coming out to see John, who was preaching repentance from sin. And indeed, their intent wasn't to be baptised themselves, for they were only interested in what was going on as observers; there was no desire in their hearts to confess *their* sin, for in their self-righteousness they believed themselves to be good, when in fact they were not. So John continued speaking to them, saying:

Matthew 3:8-9

Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.

In other words, John was saying to them that God wanted to see fruit in their lives that showed they were repentant in their hearts. He wanted to see a sincere acknowledgement of their need for a Saviour. But John, preempting their self-righteousness, seeing they were full of pride that they were Abraham's descendants, and not unclean gentiles, says; don't try and justify yourself by your lineage, for God is able to raise up others that will come to Him in faith like Abraham did, that will not try and justify themselves by their own good works. Remember God had quite literally made Adam from the dust of the earth!

And John goes on to say that this change of heart was oh so necessary, because the time is coming when God will judge the world, and no unrighteous man will be able to stand before Him:

Matthew 3:10

And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

That is, the fruit of a repentant heart in the life of a believer will distinguish them from those whose hearts have not turned to God. And those that bear no good fruit will (like a tree) be cut down, and thrown into the fire of judgement.

And John continues:

Matthew 3:11

I indeed baptise you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

So then, John points to Jesus, saying He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. Which are two different things, for the fire mentioned here is not that of Pentecost, because we're told in Acts 2:

Acts 2:1-4

When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

That is, the Holy Spirit came upon them, appearing in tongues as of fire. Not fire itself, but like it. And so rather, the fire that John is speaking of here in Matthew, is that of judgement. And those outcomes are ultimately the choice provided to us — for if we approach Christ in repentance and faith, believing in Him to save us, then He will not only do so, but will fill us with His Holy Spirit. But if we instead rest on our own self-righteousness to save us, then we will in the end be judged by Him accordingly. And John describes this further, saying:

Matthew 3:12

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

That is, the only ones who will escape the judgement of God (that is, the wheat which He will gather into the barn) are those who have put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ to save them, which He alone is able to do, for He alone lived a perfect, sinless life, that He might die in our place on the cross — that great exchange of the innocent for the guilty. That as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, we might be reconciled to God, because *"He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."*

But those who refuse to come to Christ in repentance and faith, believing in Him, will suffer the ultimate consequence for their sin — that God will judge them, as He ought to, being that He is Holy, He is just, and He is righteous.

And those two things are both the most wonderful news there has ever been, but also the most terrifying prospect there will ever be. And I must be clear on this, that the fiery judgement of hell will be no party of any kind. It won't be a place where you can hang out with your mates and rock and roll stars of years gone by. It will be agony.

Jesus described it like this. In Matthew 8:12 He described the outer darkness, saying *"There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* In Matthew 13 He said *"The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth."*

Then in Matthew 18 He said: *"If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire."*

In Matthew 25, Jesus said *"Then He will also say to those on the left hand, Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels:"* and goes on to describe it as *"everlasting punishment"*.

And of course, the book of Revelation is very clear, with God saying in chapter 21: *"He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son. But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."*

To teach that there is no hell, that there is no punishment for sinners, is to teach contrary to the Bible. It is to say that Jesus was wrong, that He lied. And those who do so will have to give account of their words and actions before God Himself.

But given we *can* trust Jesus and His Word, what does that mean for you?

1. First, if you have never before personally come to Jesus as your Saviour, repenting of your sin and putting your faith in Him to save you, then do it today. Do it without delay. Because the alternative, though you might not want to think about it, is terrifying. You see, God is so good, so Holy, that He cannot let sin go unpunished. He cannot let your sin go unpunished. So your *only* hope, is in Jesus, who died on the cross in *your* place, paying for *your* sin, that *you* might not have to. But this wonderful grace isn't automatic. Think of it like this; someone could buy you a birthday or Christmas present. The price has been paid, and they are standing there offering it to you. But unless you accept that present from them, it will do you no good. It's not enough to merely believe God exists. It's not enough to merely believe He loves you. You must repent of your sin (which is more about your heart than your actions) and choose to put your faith in Him to save you. Do it today, I beg you.
2. But, if you *have* truly put your faith in Jesus to save you, then this should result in gratitude. For He has not only born the punishment you deserved on the cross, but He has saved you from an eternity in hell. And that should make all the difference in how you live, for those who have received such grace *surely* won't treat such kindness with contempt, as if it were some small thing He has done. But rather, out of love for Him you'll want to keep His commandments. You'll want to praise Him. You'll want to please Him.
3. And furthermore, since you have personally received such amazing grace, and you understand that this is a matter of either eternity with Jesus, or an eternity in hell, then you should seek to share the gospel at every opportunity. That doesn't mean you'll find it easy. But it does mean you should seek to do it. You should be seeking to share Jesus with your family, with your friends, with your colleagues. Indeed, we should all be looking for every opportunity we have — including with strangers we meet, whether in the supermarket, the coffeeshop, or at church outreach events. This isn't the responsibility of a select few. It is the responsibility of us all.

Now, as we consider these things, inevitably we will think of those we know who have died, who as far we are aware didn't know Jesus as their Saviour. And if that doesn't bother us, then we're not really taking this seriously. Indeed, Charles Spurgeon went as far to say that if you do not desire to see others saved, then you are not saved yourself. Serious words.

Yet in the pain of considering where those who have already died have gone, we can take some comfort in that we don't fully know all that someone thinks in their final moments — and there will indeed be some wonderful surprises in Heaven as we meet those who have put their faith in Christ in their last moments. But also, we know that God is good, and He is just, and one day He will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and there will be no more sadness. That means, as tragically sad as it is today when someone dies without coming to know Christ, we will not be in tears for eternity — for we will see that God has been very fair, that He has been just, that He has been Holy.

But let me add this, that if *you* don't know Jesus as your Saviour — don't let the eternal destiny of a loved one dictate whether you come to Christ yourself. For, should the worst case be the reality, that a loved one ends up in hell, then you also going there doesn't mean you're going to somehow be reunited in joy with them. Far from it. It is doubtful if you'll even be aware they are there. So rather, be wise, and consider your *own* eternal destiny. It is not a decision you want to get wrong.

Now, as Matthew continues his account, we read:

Matthew 3:13

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

And we should consider that if Jesus was willing to be baptised, so should we — especially given that He has instructed us to be baptised.

Matthew 3:14

And John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I need to be baptised by You, and are You coming to me?"

That is, John recognised that he himself was a sinner – and Jesus was not. We don't know how much he had seen Jesus grow up, but there was a family connection of course, and we know from what he already said in this chapter that he held Jesus in high esteem, saying "*He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry.*"

Furthermore, from Mary's visit to Elizabeth his mother, it would have been known what the angel Gabriel had said — that Jesus would be the Messiah, the Saviour of the world. And we also know John understood this, for we read of this same moment in John's gospel, which notes: "*The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"*"

And so John is amazed that Jesus wanted John to baptise *Him*.

Matthew 3:15

But Jesus answered and said to him, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness." Then he allowed Him.

And so despite his amazement, John concedes to Jesus, and baptises Him — which is what the final verses of this chapter record. But before we look at those, let us consider *why* Jesus wanted to be baptised. For it was not because of His own sin, for He didn't sin once. But rather, it was because of us. That is, here we see the King identifying Himself with His subjects, for the baptism of Christ spoke of the death He would endure that we might be forgiven, that our sin might be paid for in full.

And we read:

Matthew 3:16

When He had been baptised, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him.

So very definitely a full immersion baptism, Jesus came up out of the water, and we read that the Holy Spirit descend on Him like a dove. Not literally a dove, but like a dove (or in the manner of a dove). And so Jesus was not only baptised by water, but filled by the Holy Spirit, enabling Him for the ministry that He had been called to. A moment John also records in His gospel account, writing:

John 1:32-34

And John bore witness, saying, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him. I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptise with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptises with the Holy Spirit.' And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God."

And Matthew continues, writing in this final verse:

Matthew 3:17

And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

And what do we have? A picture of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. We see the Trinity illustrated physically – the Son baptised, the Spirit descending, and the Father speaking.

And what does God the Father say? He declares His love for the Son, whom He gave for us. And He says He is well pleased in Him. And indeed, Jesus had not only lived a sinless life, but had now identified Himself with mankind in this act of baptism, pointing to the very reason He was here – to die in our place, that we might be raised to new life with Him. And in His identifying with us, His people, He shows that He is not a distant King. Indeed, in the next chapter we'll see Him experience that which all His subjects do – and that is temptation.

Conclusion

Now, as I wrap up our study this morning, I want to draw your attention to John the Baptist, because it won't be until chapter 11 that we see anything more about him. And that's kind of the point. For, you see, his job was to point to Jesus, to prepare people's hearts to receive *Him* as their Saviour. And not draw attention to himself. And that is much like *our* responsibility; for we are also to point people to Jesus, that they might receive Him as their Saviour. It is not about us. In fact, if we ever draw people to ourselves instead of Christ, we have a real problem. May we each conclude, as John the Baptist did (and as recorded in John's gospel account), that He must increase, but we must decrease.

Application questions

So then, let me give you a few questions to consider today:

- Are you drawing attention to yourself, or to Jesus?
- How seriously are you taking sharing the gospel?
- Have you repented of your sin? Have you put your faith in Christ?

For those that have accepted Jesus as their Saviour, standing before God will be nothing less than wonderful. For those that reject Jesus as their Saviour, standing before God will be nothing less than horrifying. Don't make the mistake of rejecting Him.

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