

**August 16, 2009**

## **John the Baptist: Prepare for a New Life**

Purpose: To help us prepare for the new life that comes through repentance and forgiveness of sins

Key Bible reference: Matthew 3

Key Verse: Matthew 3.11

### **Biblical Interpretation**

Matthew 3:1. John the Baptist is a key figure in all four Gospels. He is "in the wilderness," which would remind Matthew's readers of the Exodus. (Note that in Matthew 2:19-23, Joseph retraces the steps of the Exodus by returning from Egypt where he had fled with Mary and the infant Jesus to escape Herod's massacre of children under the age of two in and around Bethlehem.) John's location in the wilderness also anticipates Jesus' temptation there (Matthew 4:1-11).

Verse 2. John's message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," is the same as Jesus' preaching in Matthew 4:17. Both Matthew and Luke draw close parallels between the ministries of John and Jesus. As we will see below, some of John's disciples may have believed that John was the Messiah. John's message would have reminded his hearers of the prophet Zechariah, who called Israel to repentance.

Verse 3. John is the prophetic voice of Isaiah 40, which is concerned with the return to Israel of the exiles in Babylon. One of the themes of Isaiah 40 is the strict fulfillment of God's will as embodied in the law. We will see that Matthew shares this concern for righteousness.

Verse 4. While John's message of repentance connects him with Zechariah, his clothing links him with Elijah (see 2 Kings 1:8). John's diet of "locusts and wild honey" probably indicated

that he lived an ascetic or hermitlike life of holiness.

Verses 5-6. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus [joh-SEE-fuhs] mentions the popularity of John the Baptist. Because of this popularity, Herod came to regard John as a threat and had him arrested. Eventually, John was beheaded at the request of Herod's niece (Matthew 14:1-12). John's was a baptism of repentance, as his message makes clear. He may have borrowed this practice of baptism from the Essenes [ES-seens], desert ascetics associated with the Qumran community who understood baptism as a cleansing of sins.

Verse 7. The Pharisees and Sadducees [SAD-joo-sees] are the main opponents of Jesus in Matthew. They represent the religious authorities who rejected Jesus and had him crucified. The two groups were quite distinct, however. The Sadducees rejected the oral law, the tradition understood by the rabbis to have been given by God to Moses on Sinai and equal in authority to the written law or Torah. They were thus opponents of the Pharisees. The Sadducees focused on the Jerusalem temple and the priests who led worship there. Because they did not support the overthrow of the Romans, who ruled Israel, the Sadducees were accused by the Pharisees of being Roman sympathizers. Following the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, the Sadducees were no longer influential in Judaism.

The Pharisees believed in a strict interpretation of the law and had developed a complex set of legal regulations, especially concerning proper observance of the sabbath. They emphasized purity and separateness and expected a Messiah who would overthrow the Romans. Interestingly, Josephus maintains that the Pharisees were the only group in Judaism that believed in the resurrection of the body.

When Sadducees and Pharisees come to John for baptism, he calls them "a brood of vipers." This phrase is also used by Jesus in reference to the Pharisees and/or Sadducees in Matthew 12:34 and 23:33. John sees their repentance as shallow and insincere, believing that they are only seeking baptism in order to escape God's "wrath."

Verse 8. It is not the outer ritual of baptism that God seeks but inner renewal and a changed life. Here, John is firmly in the prophetic tradition of Joel, who wrote, "Rend your hearts and not your clothing" (Joel 2:13).

Verses 9-10. John warns the Pharisees and Sadducees with powerful words. Their heritage as Abraham's children is not a guarantee that they will escape God's judgment. Being Abraham's descendants is not a special privilege but a unique responsibility. Since God can raise up a new people "from these stones," having Abraham as an ancestor counts for nothing when it comes to repentance. The "ax" and "fire" are symbols of God's judgment and purification. The warning is clear: Those who do not bear the "fruit" of repentance (verse 8) will face judgment.

Verse 11. The contrast here is between John's baptism and the Messiah's baptism. John's baptism is preliminary to repentance, and water is its symbol. The Messiah's baptism is more

powerful, symbolized by the "Holy Spirit" and "fire." Matthew, like the other Gospel writers, is careful to emphasize John's lesser role as preparer for the Messiah. There were apparently some persons who believed that John himself was the Messiah (see John 1:19-23). The Messiah's baptism "with the Holy Spirit and fire" is not two kinds of baptism but an emphasis on the connection between the two, as at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).

Verse 12. John expected the Messiah to come as a judge. Separating the "wheat" from the "chaff" and burning the chaff was a common farming practice in Jesus' time.

Verses 13-15. John's subservient role is again underlined. The early church had to deal with the fact that a sinless Jesus was baptized by John. As John himself says, the opposite would have been more appropriate. Jesus submits to baptism to "fulfill all righteousness." The word righteousness as used here refers to the entire purpose of God for God's people. Matthew will show Jesus fulfilling his messianic destiny again and again.