

# Baptisms & Beginnings

Matthew 3

Between chapters 2 & 3 of Matthew, Jesus of Nazareth has grown into a mature adult. The special event recorded in Matthew 3 marks the beginning of Jesus' public earthly ministry.<sup>1</sup>

## John the Baptist

Read Matthew 3:1-10. John the Baptist<sup>2</sup> came preaching and baptizing<sup>3</sup> (3:1, 6).

1. What was John's message? What did John tell people to do, and why? (3:2)<sup>4</sup>



John said, "...the kingdom of heaven has come near" (3:2). This was also the message of Jesus (4:17) and his disciples (10:7). The kingdom "has come near" because the King has arrived. Through his ministry, John "prepared the way for the Lord" – that is, Jesus the King (3:3).

2. John baptized people. What did these baptisms represent? (3:2, 6, 8)

 "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (3:8)<sup>5</sup>

Genuine repentance brings positive results. The baptized people should *begin* to live differently if they have truly turned away from their sins and toward God in faith and obedience.

3. John did not warmly welcome the Pharisees and Sadducees (3:7).<sup>6</sup> Why did John respond in this way? What is apparently wrong with these Pharisees and Sadducees? (3:7-9)

Self-righteousness, hypocrisy, *false* repentance, and dependence on one's ethnic or religious association will result in God's judgement (3:10).

4. How can we know if *we* need to repent?<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jesus was 'about thirty years old when he began his ministry' (Luke 3:23).

<sup>2</sup> 'John' was a common name. *This* John was called 'the Baptist' because of his ministry of baptizing. In this context, 'baptize' (*baptizō*) generally means to immerse in water. John was baptizing people 'in the Jordan River' (3:6).

<sup>3</sup> This took place in 'the wilderness of Judea' which included the lower Jordan Valley north of the Dead Sea.

<sup>4</sup> To 'repent' is to change direction in thinking, attitude and behavior. To repent is to turn away from sin (attitudes and behaviors opposed to God's authority and moral will) and turn toward God in faith and obedience. The call to repent is connected to the coming of the 'kingdom of heaven' (the kingdom or kingship of God). In this context, 'kingdom' may be defined as the dynamic reign or kingly rule of God. While full realization of the kingdom is future, when Jesus returns to visibly and spatially establish it, it 'has come near' because the King (Jesus) has come. The kingdom brings renewal, blessing, righteousness and peace. But it also brings judgment, because sin does not belong in the kingdom.


<sup>5</sup> 'fruit' is the result of genuine repentance. Genuine repentance should result in positive change. The NLT translates this verse: 'Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God.'

<sup>6</sup> Pharisees & Sadducees were Jewish religious leaders. They probably came to investigate John's activities. Matthew does not say they came to be baptized. In any case, John obviously did not think they were sincerely repentant.

<sup>7</sup> Repenting is not just turning from bad behaviors to good behaviors; it involves a right attitude toward God.

## One More Powerful

Read Matthew 3:11-12. John baptized people with water to represent their repentance, but he said one was coming who would baptize people “with the Holy Spirit and fire.”<sup>8</sup> That “one” is Jesus, who is more powerful than John the Baptist. The coming of the kingdom would include the outpouring of the Spirit who regenerates, indwells, transforms and empowers believers.<sup>9</sup>

 *After Jesus’ death and resurrection, and the subsequent coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, Peter proclaimed, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38)*

## Baptism of Jesus

Read Matthew 3:13-17. Jesus came from Galilee to be baptized by John (3:13).

5. How did John respond to Jesus’ coming to be baptized? (3:14) Why do you think he responded in this way?
6. John was baptizing people who needed to confess their sins and repent. Jesus did not need to repent.<sup>10</sup> So why did Jesus insist that John baptize him? (3:15)<sup>11</sup>
7. What happened when Jesus was baptized? (3:16-17) What can we see from this?<sup>12</sup>
8. What sticks out to you in this passage? How does it impress, help, encourage or challenge you? What questions do you have?

## Reflection/Application

- “All have sinned” (*Romans 3:23*). Thus all need to repent, trusting in the crucified and risen Jesus as Savior & Lord. Do you need to do this? Do you need to be baptized? Ask about it.
- Brothers & sisters, are you “producing fruit in keeping with repentance?” We *can* bear good fruit because of our union with Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Read Galatians 5:13-26.

<sup>8</sup> ‘fire’ – this may refer to the purifying and refining work of the Holy Spirit in repentant people, and/or it may refer to the judgment of unrepentant people (in view of verses 7, 10 and 12).

<sup>9</sup> ‘Baptize with (in) the Holy Spirit’ is interpreted in different ways. It obviously includes the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (*Acts 2:1-21*). Referring to this event Jesus told his disciples, ‘For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit’ (*Acts 1:5*). Another reference is 1 Corinthians 12:13 which says, ‘we (believers) were all baptized by (with, in) one Spirit so as to form one body.’ This refers to Christian conversion, which the practice of Christian water baptism represents. In any case, the distinction between Jesus’ baptism and John’s baptism is the powerful activity of the Holy Spirit. The Old Testament prophets spoke about the outpouring and work of the Holy Spirit as characteristics of the kingdom the Messiah would bring (*Isaiah 32:15; 44:3; Ezekiel 36:26-27; 39:29*).

<sup>10</sup> Unlike every other human being, Jesus did not sin (*Hebrews 4:15; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 John 3:5; 1 Peter 2:22*).

<sup>11</sup> Jesus said, ‘it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness’ (3:15). It was God’s will that John baptize Jesus. What did it represent? France says it 1) indicates Jesus’ solidarity with John’s call to repentance in view of the arrival of God’s kingship, laying the foundation for his own mission; and 2) indicates Jesus’ identification with those who by accepting John’s baptism declared their desire for a new beginning with God. (France, R.T. *The Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], 120) As the Suffering Servant (*Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Matthew 8:17; 20:28*) Jesus identified with fallen humans to bear our sin and provide the way of salvation.

<sup>12</sup> We see ‘the Trinity’ – Father, Son & Holy Spirit. We see Jesus as the Father’s beloved Son, approved for his mission.