

Lessons from Matthew 3

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All four gospels introduce Jesus' ministry with the work of John the Baptist (cf. Mark 1:4; Luke 3:2–3; John 1:6–7). He is mentioned as baptizing in a wide area that included “the wilderness of Judea” (Matt 3:1), “all the region around the Jordan” (Luke 3:3), and “Bethabara beyond the Jordan” (John 1:28). His wide and growing influence apparently aroused the concern of the authorities in Jerusalem (Matt 3:7; John 1:19, 24). According to Josephus, John was attracting such large crowds that Herod Antipas feared his influence over the people and eventually arrested him (*Ant.* 18.118). Matthew, like the other gospels, identifies the beginning of Jesus' ministry with His baptism by John.

Structure of the Chapter

The account of John's preaching and his baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3 may be divided into three parts: the message and work of John the Baptist (Matt 3:1–6), the rebuke of Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt 3:7–12), and the baptism and identity of Jesus (Matt 3:13–17).

The first section describes John's prophetic ministry as a fulfillment of Isaiah 40, modeled after Elijah, and impacting all Israel. In the central section, John delineates two classes within Israel: trees bearing good fruit, later described as “wheat,” and trees cut down and thrown into the fire—“chaff” to be burned up with unquenchable fire (Matt 3:10, 12). These two bracketing references to fire serve to guide the central occurrence of this word in the saying of John about the Coming One (Matt 3:11). The third section acts as a transition in Matthew from John's ministry to that of Jesus and contains a threefold witness as to who Jesus is. First, John recognizes Jesus as the one who will baptize in a greater way than him (Matt 3:14). Next Jesus' identity is revealed visibly with the dove descending on Him. Finally, it is revealed audibly with a voice from heaven acknowledging Him as “My beloved Son” (Matt 3:16–17). Not only has John prepared the way for Jesus—Heaven has too.

Interpretation of the Chapter

Verses 1–6

- Isaiah 40:3 (quoted in Matt 3:3) is taken from the chapter that begins the second major part of Isaiah, in which the predominant themes are Israel's restoration, God's reign, and salvation. Israel's breaking of the covenant resulted in the exile (Jer 31:31–32), so a remnant's “return” to the land implies also a return to covenant righteousness by the people of Israel (Isa 10:21–22). Since to a large degree this has not yet happened, John the Baptist appears.
- John calls for repentance (Matt 3:2) in view of his announcement that God's coming in fiery judgment is imminent (Matt 3:7, 10–12; cf. Isa 40:10). Repentance, in the biblical sense, means more than a change of mind; it is a turning from transgression and turning (or returning) to God. The image of preparing the path for the coming King by smoothing it out and straightening its course illustrates the inward change that the gospel makes which will be evident also on the outside.
- John's appearance is like that of Elijah (Matt 3:4) and Jesus will later identify him as the “Elijah who is to come” (Matt 11:14; Mal 4:5; cf. John 1:21; Luke 1:17). This links his preparatory work with that of the Lord's messenger who would “prepare the way” before Him (Mal 3:1).
- The baptism of John was similar to the ritual washings Jews were familiar with in that it was by immersion (note this ritual use of *baptizō* in Mark 7:4; Luke 11:38).
 - More than 150 ritual baths, constructed in accordance with Jewish standards for total immersion and dating to the first century, have been excavated in Jerusalem alone.
 - Immersion in a moving source of water such as the Jordan was deemed by many Jews to provide the highest level of ritual purification.

- John’s baptism also differed from ritual immersions in several important respects:
 - It was a one-time immersion and did not need to be repeated.
 - It was not self-administered but administered by John, which seems to explain his unusual title, “the Baptizer.”
 - It was connected with the confession of sin and was thus to reflect an inner, moral cleansing from impurity rather than the cleansing from ritual impurity necessary for worship and offering sacrifice in the temple.
 - It prefigured Christian baptism “with the Holy Spirit” that would characterize the work of the one who would come after John.
- John’s baptism helps us better understand Christian baptism:
 - Christian baptism is also by immersion—John baptized in the Jordan “because there was much water there” (John 3:23). Jesus went into the water and came up out of the water (Matt 3:16), setting an example for His followers.
 - By being “buried” in water and coming up again, Christians identify themselves with Christ by accepting His death in their place, receiving forgiveness for their sins, and expressing faith in His resurrection (Acts 2:38; 1 Pet 3:21).
 - Christian baptism is very significant in that it symbolizes the believer’s death to sin and resurrection to a new life in the Spirit (Rom 6:3–4).

Verses 7–12

- The Pharisees and Sadducees were rivals and disagreed on many things but they were united in their opposition to John’s work, just as later they would unite in opposition to Jesus (Matt 3:10:1, 6, 11–12).
- The Greek expression (“coming for the baptism”) is ambiguous (unlike Matt 3:13) and does not necessarily indicate that these religious leaders came to be baptized. On the other hand, John’s rebuke, “Who warned you to flee...” suggests that some of them may have wanted to be baptized but without the corresponding change of heart that baptism implied (see DA 105).
- John calling the Pharisees and Sadducees “vipers” points to their poisonous spiritual influence, similar to the way Philo (commenting on Deut 32:32–33) describes the danger to the soul from “wickedness” by comparing it to the mortal danger posed by venomous snakes: “biting the soul like an asp or a viper, inflicting envenomed wounds, utterly incurable.” (*On Drunkenness*, 223). Like John the Baptist, Jesus calls the Pharisees a “brood of vipers” (Matt 3:12:34; 23:33) and sees beyond their flattery to perceive the “wickedness” of their intentions (Matt 22:18). He also warns his disciples to recognize and beware of the leavening influence of the Pharisees and the Sadducees (Matt 16:6).
- Matthew’s placement of this central and longest of the three sections emphasizes John’s warning about trusting to physical descent from Abraham rather than bearing good fruit, a theme that Jesus will also emphasize (Matt 8:11–12). Israel tended to overlook the conditions of faith and obedience, upon which God’s continued blessing on Abraham and His descendants was to be given (Gen 26:3–5; Jer 31:33–37; DA 106). The repeated use of the plural (brood, vipers, children, stones) hints at an impending judgment on the nation and its failed leadership (cf. Matt 21:43).
- Both John and Jesus employ the biblical metaphor of a tree as a symbol of people and fruit as a symbol of works (see Ps 1:3; Isa 1:30; 61:3) to illuminate the coming judgment (Matt 3:10, 12; 7:19). “Not by its name, but by its fruit, is the value of a tree determined. . . . John declared to the Jews that their standing before God was to be decided by their character and their life. Profession was worthless. If their life and character were not in harmony with God’s law, they were not His people” (DA 107).
- The “ax . . . laid to the root of the trees” (v. 10) alludes to God’s judgment on the nations (Isa 10:33–34; Eze 31:2–18; Amos 2:9) and, specifically, their leaders—including Israel (Isa

10:18–19; Jer 11:16; Ezek 15:6). Based on John’s message, Jesus is identified as the one who will bring this judgment (cf. Matt 21:19).

- John’s work of baptizing with water was just a shadow of the greater work that Jesus would do as the Messiah, which includes bestowing the gift of the Holy Spirit on His followers. Judging from the context, the baptism of fire refers to the final destruction of the wicked, when God “will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (v. 12; 13:40–42, 49–50, etc.) in “the lake of fire” (Rev 20:9, 14–15; cf. Mal 4:1; 2 Pet 3:5–7)—the likely future for at least some of John’s hearers (v. 7).

Verses 13–17

- Jesus’ approximately seventy-mile journey from Nazareth in Galilee (cf. Matt 3:2:23) to the Jordan for the purpose of being baptized by John (Matt 3:13) shows a conscious awareness of God’s will as to how and when His messianic work was to begin (see also Matt 3:15).
- Even before the visible sign of Jesus’ identity is given, John discerns the difference in Jesus’ character and that He has no need to be baptized (Matt 3:14; DA 110). As in the other gospels Jesus announces that His messianic work *fulfills* prophecy (Mark 1:15; Luke 4:21), so here His baptism is to “*fulfill* all righteousness” (Matt 3:15; cf. 5:17). It foreshadowed His sacrificial death and resurrection and illustrates His full submission to the Father’s will (Mark 10:38; Matt 12:50; 20:18–19, 22).
- After Jesus came *up* from the water, according to Luke, it was as He was praying (Luke 3:21) that the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit came *down* like a dove upon Him (Matt 3:16), anointing Him as the Messiah and equipping Him for His ministry (Acts 10:38)—a role that Matthew links here and elsewhere with the Servant of Isaiah (see especially Matt 12:18–21 quoting Isa 42:1–4, and Matt 8:17 quoting Isa 53:4).

Application of the Chapter

Some lessons that can be drawn from this chapter are:

- It has been said that “God has no grandchildren, only children.” As Adventists, our physical heritage, even if we have grown up in the church and can trace our Adventist roots back many generations, means nothing without a living and genuine connection with God and His Word.
- While no one can read the heart, the “fruit” we bear—the outward actions and lifestyle changes—indicate whether or not the Holy Spirit is working in our life. One of the reasons for the biblically based lifestyle standards we have as Seventh-day Adventists is as a visible indicator that a person has experienced conversion and is ready for baptism.
- At every step and stage of life, Jesus is the perfect example for us (Matt 10:25; 16:24; 1 Pet 2:21; cf. John 13:15).
- A work similar to that of John the Baptist has been given to God’s last-day people to prepare the world for Christ’s second coming (Matt 24:14; Rev 14:7–12; DA 101).
- John’s warning of judgment is an important encouragement for all of us, especially the leaders of God’s church, to be awake and ready to meet the Coming One at His second advent (Matt 24:44; Luke 18:8; Rom 13:11).