



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for January 3, 2010
Released on Wednesday, December 30, 2009**

“Proclaimed in Baptism”

Lesson Text: Matthew 3:1-6, 11-17
Background Scripture: Matthew 3:1-17
Devotional Reading: Acts 8:26-38

Matthew 3:1-6, 11-17

1 In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea,
2 And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.
3 For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.
4 And the same John had his raiment of camel’s hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey.
5 Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan,
6 And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.
.....
11 I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire:
12 Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.
13 Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him.
14 But John forbade him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?
15 And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered him.
16 And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him:
17 And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

TODAY'S AIM

Facts: to learn the mission of John the Baptist as a herald of Christ and to see why Christ submitted to John's baptism.

Principle: to be aware that God planned the announcement and affirmation of His Son as Messiah.

Application: to draw a distinction between John's baptism and the later baptism promoted by Jesus.

Lesson Background

Between the days of Malachi and those of John the Baptist, the nation of Israel had not heard the voice of a prophet of God—that's over 400 years! During those years of silence, some may have begun to feel that God had abandoned or forgotten His people. But the truth about God is that He is always at work, whether we recognize it or not. During those 400 years God had been working out His plan of the ages. That plan involved providing the ultimate answer for the problem of sin.

Our lesson today reveals the end of God's period of silence as a new prophet broke onto the scene. John the Baptist had come to announce that the one promised was close at hand. John thus served as the bridge from the anticipation of the Messiah to His actual appearance.

Introduction

Baptism is a matter of obedience to the Lord's command (Matthew 28:18-20), but it is also our testimony to others of our salvation. We remember that the Ethiopian eunuch immediately wanted to be baptized after Philip taught him about salvation through Jesus Christ (Acts 8:36-38). It is amazing that immediately after believing in Christ, he understood he should take that step of obedience.

This week it is the baptism of Jesus Himself that we examine. There are many who wonder why Jesus would want to be baptized, for it certainly was not an act that followed salvation for Him. We will see what He told John.

THE MINISTRY OF JOHN (Matthew 3:1-6)

1. What was so unusual about John carrying out his ministry in the wilderness (Matthew 3:1)?

The phrase *in those days* may sound a bit vague to us. Since Jesus begins His ministry at "about thirty years of age" (Luke 3:23), we can compute this point in time to be about AD 26.

Matthew's account doesn't give us any background information on *John the Baptist*. We have to go to Luke 1 for that information. There we learn that Jesus and John the Baptist are relatives. The designation *the Baptist* identifies something about John's role as being one who baptizes.

John was the son of a priest and had the privilege and right to follow in his father's footsteps. But Matthew says he went out to the wilderness of Judea to preach instead of ministering in the temple in Jerusalem. That in itself must have said to the people that this man was unique and had a significant message. It was an urgent message, and he sounded much like some of the prophets of old. After all, the Messiah was present on earth and about to make His appearance!

2. What were the two parts of the message John presented (v. 2)?

John's message of repentance is pointed. In a general sense, to *repent* is to change one's mind about something; in the sense of the gospel, to repent is to turn from sin. This repentance is to bring about a change in behavior based on the change of mind. It constitutes an about-face or U-turn in one's life. Repentance is based on an awareness of guilt and conviction of the conscience.

John's message of repentance is in anticipation of the imminent arrival of *the kingdom of heaven*. Mark and Luke speak of it as "the kingdom of God." Matthew, writing to a Jewish audience, is thought to use the phrase "kingdom of heaven" in deference to that audience's sensitivities. (There are 32 references to "kingdom of heaven" in Matthew, but none in the other Gospels.) A kingdom normally is thought of as the area (realm) in which a sovereign rules. However, God's kingdom is not so much a place as it is people, thus its spiritual nature.

The ancient Jews have been anticipating the inbreaking of this kingdom. What catches many by surprise, however, is that repentance is a prerequisite for entrance. Many undoubtedly think that their admission into the kingdom of Heaven is assured by birthright. After all, they are Israelites! But as verse 9 (not in today's text) makes clear, biological descent from Abraham isn't the main issue. Repentance is.

3. What was John doing according to the quotation from Isaiah 40:3 (v. 3 in today's text)?

Matthew wrote that John the Baptist was the fulfillment of one of Isaiah's prophecies (Isa. 40:3) some 700 years prior to John's arrival. So significant was the appearance and ministry of this man that all four Gospel writers mentioned him and quoted this verse (cf. Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4-5; John 1:23). We may even discern in this man the main connecting link between the Old and New Testaments. This is true because Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all messianic prophecies of the Old Testament and John was His forerunner.

A king in the ancient world has people who go ahead of him to herald his coming. John is in this role. His announcement of the coming of the Messiah is spoken of as one declaring and imploring through a strong *voice*. It signifies that what is being said is being said with passion.

Not only is the coming of a king heralded, but also *the way* is prepared. Rough roads are smoothed out so nothing will impede the arrival of a king. King Jesus comes to establish a spiritual kingdom and reign in the lives of people. Thus the preparation that is needed for His arrival is a spiritual preparation. It is a preparation of heart and mind. Thus the call for repentance.

4. How did the lifestyle of John compare to that of the religious leaders of his day (v. 4)?

The strange dress of this preacher of repentance is similar to that of the Old Testament prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:7, 8).

Clothing made of *camel's hair* is in sharp contrast with the soft robes and vestments worn by royalty. The leather *girdle* or belt about his waist is an article of clothing that is identifiable with the working class. Such a belt is used to fasten the clothing about the waist so the worker can labor unimpeded. It is not a linen cord, but rather a rough, strong belt.

Also startling is John's diet. The locust is a permissible food under Jewish dietary law (Leviticus 11:22). The mention of *locusts* alongside *wild honey* may not signify two things eaten separately, but perhaps refers to boiled or baked locust that is prepared in the honey. In any case, the diet is not the delectable food of the day. Rather, it is the diet of one living off the land. The lifestyle and message of John and other prophets stand in stark contrast to that of the cultured religious leaders.

5. What was the scope of John's baptisms (vs. 5,6)?

John's preaching works! Those who hear him are convicted. They repent, acknowledging *their sins*. That John teaches that baptism is to accompany repentance is seen in Luke 3:3.

People kept flowing out to hear this preacher by the Jordan River. They came not only from the city of Jerusalem but also from the entire province of Judea and all over the Jordan Valley. The excitement engendered by this man, the first in over four hundred years to speak prophetically, was unprecedented. There was something about him that aroused great interest and curiosity.

Most of the people who came were there to confess their sins and be baptized, but this was not true of everyone. Matthew 3:7 indicates the Pharisees and Sadducees were there too. When John saw them, he railed against them for their hypocrisy, warning them that

they too should repent and prove their repentance by their lives (v. 8). They were in danger of facing judgment (vs. 9-10). The common people coming with sincere hearts, however, confessed their sins and were baptized as a testimony of their change of heart.

THE PREPARATION OF JESUS (Matthew 3:11-17)

6. How was John's baptism different from Christian baptism, and how was Jesus' different from both (vs. 11,12)?

John's baptism was different from Christian baptism. Those being baptized were doing so in anticipation of the arrival of the Messiah. When we are baptized, we are identifying ourselves with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. However, for Jews to be baptized indicated something new. It said they recognized that being a Jew was not adequate for getting into God's kingdom, that there was a need for the confession of sins and a change of heart.

We should note that "John was not the one who would forgive sin but rather he was identifying them with the One whom he introduced who would forgive sin" (Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, Zondervan). Jesus Christ was and is the focus of attention in baptism. They anticipated Him; we testify to having received Him.

The Person coming next was far superior to John, and His ministry would be much more effective than his (v. 11b). This One was so far superior to him that he, John, was not worthy to carry His sandals (undo and remove them, which was the most menial task of the lowest servant). The One coming would baptize not with water but with the Holy Spirit and fire.

The two symbols of the Messiah's baptism, the Holy Spirit and fire, have been studied much, with different conclusions reached. One conclusion is that the two symbols refer to different events, one coming upon those who believe and the other upon those who do not, in which case fire would speak of judgment. Relative to that, some think the baptism with the Spirit happened at Christ's first coming and that of fire will be at His second coming. Another conclusion is that the symbols together refer to the same event.

From the context there seems to be merit to viewing this as a single event. Matthew 3:12 refers to the refining process that will occur under the Messiah. Just as a winnowing fork tossed grain in the air and led to the separation of the grain and chaff, so the Messiah will separate believers and unbelievers. Believers will enter the kingdom, while unbelievers will be taken away for destruction (cf. 24:36-44).

7. Why did John not want to baptize Jesus, and what was Jesus' answer (vs. 13-15)?

For *Jesus* to come from Nazareth in *Galilee* to the *Jordan* River means a trip of some 70 miles. To go to such an effort indicates the importance Jesus places on what is about to happen.

Jesus has come to be *baptized*, but why? John's baptism is a baptism of repentance (Acts 19:4), but Jesus has nothing from which He needs to repent (Hebrews 4:15). John himself recognizes a problem, since he recognized himself as being far inferior to Jesus, John stated that he was the one who needed to be baptized by Jesus rather than the other way around. However, Jesus insisted they go ahead with the ritual.

If *Jesus* does not need a baptism of repentance unto forgiveness because He is sinless, then why does He insist that John baptize Him? The foundational answer is that it is the right thing to do ("suffer it to be so now" v. 15).

But we should probe further. Jesus said He should be baptized, "for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness" (v.15). What did He mean by this? Jesus

came to provide righteousness for sinners. In order to be identified with the sinners He came to save, He needed to be baptized just as they were. He was also identifying Himself with those who had already been baptized by John. Jesus' baptism, therefore, seems to have been primarily for the purpose of becoming identified with those He came to save. In this He was accomplishing His Father's will.

8. By whom was Jesus affirmed immediately after His baptism, and what happened at that time (vs. 16,17)?

As soon as Jesus came up out of the water, He immediately received affirmation. The Spirit makes His arrival at this event. Isaiah 11:2 states that *the Spirit of God* is to rest on His anointed or chosen one. The image *like a dove* is clarified by Luke 3:22, which says that "the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him."

We see the Son of God and the Spirit of God working together at other times in Scripture. One occasion is at creation itself. In Genesis 1:2 we see the Spirit of God moving on the face of the waters. We know that Jesus was part of this creation process because John 1:1-3 indicates that nothing was made except by the Word; the Word is identified as Jesus in John 1:14. See also Colossians 1:16.

God used a dove in the Old Testament as a sign of His deliverance. In Genesis 8:6-11 a dove brought an olive leaf to the ark when the earth was ready to be inhabited again after the flood. The word picture of the dove at the baptism of Jesus thus offers a certain parallel to the idea of God providing new life to a world that was filled with corruption in Noah's day.

In addition to the Spirit of God comes the *voice* of God. This is one of those times in Scripture when we see all three persons of the Godhead coming together at one time. In Genesis 1:26, God says, "Let *us* make man in our image." The use of the word *us* implies plurality even as God is one (Galatians 3:20).

We also see the interplay of the three divine persons in the nativity story. God speaks to Mary (by means of an angel) to tell her that she will be with child by the Holy Spirit. Of course, this child is the third member of the Godhead, Jesus. Now at the inauguration of the ministry of Jesus we see the three working together again.

God's approval and affirmation of both the person and future work of His Son is confirmed in this event. God's announcement that *this is my beloved Son* does not mean that it is the baptism of Jesus that somehow confers sonship on Him. He was already the Son. This spoken declaration is for John's benefit and ours as well.

Jesus is unique as God's Son. Yet each person who surrenders to God and is baptized into Christ is also a child of God (Galatians 3:26, 27). In that case, we can think of God saying to us, "This is my son (or daughter) in whom I am well pleased." Those who follow Jesus truly do receive the approval and recognition of God. Even so, no one is "Son" in the same sense as Jesus.

Some students link the words of God here with Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42. These passages speak of the chosen one of God and His role of service and sacrifice. This great day and this event mark the beginning of a life that is filled with this service and sacrifice. Jesus did it for us.

9. Why do so many of us fail to keep our New Year's resolutions? If we resolve to heed John's call to repentance, how can we carry through with that decision?

We definitely are fickle beings! Today's firm resolve melts into tomorrow's compromise under the pressures of daily life. Efforts we undertake only through human strength and wisdom are subject to failure (Zechariah 4:6).

In Christ, however, we have a supernatural source of power that we can call on at any time. The Holy Spirit assists us in our weaknesses (Romans 8:26). God understands and sympathizes with our struggles (Hebrews 4:15). He has provided a means of forgiveness that does not depend on our achieving perfection.

CONCLUSION

New Year's Resolution

This is the time of year that many people resolve to make changes in their lives. It may be changing an unhealthy diet, initiating an exercise routine, or correcting improper sleep habits. Some resolve to get their financial house in order or shake an addiction.

The best resolution anyone can make is to heed the call of John the Baptist and repent. Perhaps there is a sin habit that is controlling your life. Determine now to turn from it. Even if you've been a Christian for a long time, you can resolve anew to honor Jesus as Messiah (1 John 1:9).

PRAYER

Father, give us a conscience to repent and a will to do so. Remind us that repentance is not a one-time thing but an all-the-time thing. As we repent, may You be able to say of each of us "ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26). We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

The need to repent never goes away.

PRACTICAL POINTS

- 1.** If God's people have lapsed into complacency, He will confront them in a way that will shock them out of it (Matthew 3:1-4).
- 2.** When God confronts our sin, many will be repelled, but God's Spirit will gather whom He chooses (vs. 5-6).
- 3.** Confronting sin is essential, but saving is always a mightier work than judging (vs. 11-12).
- 4.** God's way is always one of humility and submission to authority (vs. 13-15).
- 5.** God's calling is never alone; He always supplies the needed power and motivation for it (v. 16).
- 6.** God's pleasure is in Jesus and whoever belongs to Him (v. 17).

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON:

Next week's lesson is "**Strengthened in Temptation**" and shows that we must use the power of God to face temptation and not try to withstand it in our own strength. Study Matthew 4:1-11.

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