

The Book of Matthew

Portraying Jesus Christ our King

A Bible study guide by pianist David Nevue (<http://www.davidnevue.com/studies>)

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MATTHEW 3:1-12

A Voice in the Wilderness

Study Notes & Comments...

In our last study, we talked about the ‘wise men’ who sought after Jesus. Now, we move forward in time by almost three decades. John the Baptist is out in the wilderness preaching that the ‘kingdom of heaven is at hand,’ meaning that it is near, just within grasp.

John, as you may remember from our study in chapter 1, is a distant cousin of Jesus (Mary and Elizabeth were cousins). John is the son of Zacharias the priest and Elizabeth.

In preparation for this study, read Luke 1:5-25, 57-80.

John’s purpose is made clear: to announce the coming of the Messiah, and to prepare the people of Israel for his coming.

- 1) 3:1-4: John the Baptist was a man quite unlike your ‘typical’ man. He spent his days in the desert, living off locusts, dressed in camel hair. **He had absolutely no desire for the things of this world.** He didn’t seek after a career, didn’t care about his appearance, and didn’t seek approval from his peers. He simply served the Lord. He really is the picture of a man serving God at its purest.

How many of you desire to be like John, having faith to that level of intensity? Can you imagine living life in such complete separation from the trappings of this world? Interesting to think about, isn’t it? That would take some commitment.

John is the first prophet to appear on the scene since Malachi - the first prophet Israel has seen in over 400 years! The quote in verse 3 is from **Isaiah 40:3**. Take a look at that passage, but also read verses 1-11. This entire passage proclaims the coming of the Lord. Matthew tells us that John the Baptist is the one Isaiah spoke of, sent to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah. The essence of his message is:

- A) Repent!
- B) The kingdom of heaven is at hand
- C) The Messiah is coming

John’s message to his listeners is the same our message we need to get out to the world today. Jesus *is* coming soon.

What does it mean to repent? It means to ‘turn around,’ to turn from sin and turn toward God. **Repentance isn’t just about what you *stop* doing, it’s also about what you *start* doing** – walking

in obedience and seeking after the Lord's will. Repentance without change isn't real repentance.

An interesting side note. John was of the tribe of Levi (his father was a priest). So John was, in a very legitimate way, a High Priest before the Lord. John's coming also fulfilled the words of the prophet Malachi (3:1, 4:5, Luke 1:17)

- 2) 3:5-6: **John's message made an impact.** The people of Israel at this time are living in expectation of the Messiah. In fact, many actually wondered if John *was* the Messiah (see Luke 3:15)! All of Jerusalem and Judea heard his message. He was a curiosity to some, a threat to others, but his message was being heard and talked about throughout the country. He was big news.

John's role was to prepare the hearts of the people for Jesus. He offered the 'Baptism of Repentance.' That is, the baptism was representative of the cleansing of their heart and life. It was symbolic of submitting to God, being washed clean and being made new. In 'preparing the way' John was clearing the path, in a manner of speaking, for the Lord to come through. He was softening the hearts of the people, getting them ready for the coming of Jesus, their Messiah.

John's Baptism was somewhat different than ours (see Acts 19:1-6) in that our Baptism, while also a symbol of cleansing, is also symbolic of our death and rebirth in Christ (Rom. 6:2-13, Col 2:9-14). When we are baptized *in Christ*, we receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5, 2:38-39), making us one in Christ Jesus (*1 Cor. 12:12-13*, Gal. 3:27). Baptism in Christ Jesus, in a sense, transports us from this world to a new life as a citizen of the spiritual kingdom of God. Baptism is a doorway into our new life in Christ.

- 3) 3:7-12: While the Pharisees and Sadducees came for baptism, their motives were not pure, and John knew this. The Pharisees and Sadducees had a position of religious power over the people – so very likely they came to check out their 'competition.' Perhaps they came to be baptized to gain favor with the people. We can be certain their reason for coming was not out of any sense of repentance. It was for show.

John is very harsh with these religious leaders. He calls them vipers, and says to them "who warned to you to flee from the wrath to come." In other words, John warns, don't think you, being religious, will escape God's judgement. These men claimed to be *representing* God, but they were not. God is loving, merciful, and kind – these men used their power and position to manipulate others. They were also arrogant and prideful, believing they were exempt from God's judgement just because they were descended from Abraham. They thought judgement was only coming for the Gentiles. John's message to them is that they will not escape judgement just because of their lineage (v.9). **God is concerned with a person's heart, not their lineage.**

John also warns the religious leaders that they must bear "fruit worthy of repentance." (v.8,10). **If they truly had a heart of repentance, they would bear fruit that reflected that repentance.** Jesus talks a great deal about how you can tell true disciples from the fruit they bear. Read Matthew 7:15-20, John 15:1-8,16, and Gal. 5:22-23. In this same way, we can discern whether someone who claims to be from God truly is from God. What fruit is being born? Do you see arrogance, fear, pride, manipulation, power-mongering? Or do you see humility, love, joy, peace, and long-suffering? You can judge the heart of a man by the fruit that is born in his life.

John then (v.11) warns the Pharisees of the one who is coming (that is, Jesus), who will baptize with the Holy Spirit *and* with fire. Right now, we live in the age of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. **But the time of fire is coming.** Fire does two things. It purifies through scorching heat, and it burns up the bad (the chaff), leaving only the good. For those who believe in Jesus, the baptism of fire will be positive thing, for it will purify us of everything temporal, leaving only the eternal. For those who do

not believe, the time of fire is a terrifying thing, for it will strip away everything worldly they hold on to – leaving nothing but eternal darkness.

The picture of Jesus in verse 12 is one of his final coming in power. The threshing floor is where the wheat (the good stuff) and the chaff (the bad stuff) are separated. Typically, a threshing floor would be on a hilltop, where a pitchfork was used to toss the wheat into the air. The wind would blow away the lighter chaff, and then the wheat was harvested. The bad stuff left over was burned. **The baptism of fire will come at the second coming of Christ.** Read 13:24-30, 36-43, 47-50, John 15:6, as well as 1 Cor. 3:10-15, 1 Peter 1:3-7, 2 Peter 3:10.

God is concerned about fruit. What kind of fruit are we bearing in our lives? If we are abiding in Christ, as the vine, then we can only bear good fruit – the fruit of the Spirit, because as the Word says, a grapevine bears grapes, and a fig tree bears figs. In the same way, if we are abiding in Christ, we should bear like fruit that looks like him.

However, if we are *not* abiding in Christ, we *cannot* bear the fruit of Christ. We'll wither up and die, and eventually, on the day of judgement, be cast into the fire as we have been useless.

You see, **the only things that are eternal are those things that are in Christ Jesus.** Everything else is just window dressing. John the Baptist was a man without *any* window dressing. He was a stark contrast to the showy robes of the religious leaders of the day. You know what Jesus said about John? Read **Matthew 11:11.** "I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist;" but Jesus continues, "yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

You see John, the greatest of spiritual men, was *still* under the law. He lived and died *before* the death and resurrection of Jesus. **We however, have been made *greater* than John** because we are no longer under the law, we are under the blood of Christ Jesus. Thus, we are perfect and righteous in God's sight – even more so than John the Baptist (*Rom. 3:21, 4:24, 5:17, 6:18, 9:30, 10:4, 1 Cor. 1:30, 2 Cor. 5:21, Eph. 4:22-24, Phil. 1:9-11, 3:9*).

So, how do we bear fruit? How do we obtain righteousness? But putting our faith in Jesus (not ourselves), seeking after him, abiding in him, and living and breathing the Word of God. Be encouraged, give the Lord your heart, trust him with your life, and submit to his love. He will see you through, and on that Day, the eternal fruit which you bear through Christ Jesus will be revealed.

MATTHEW 3:13-4:11

Jesus Identifies with You and Me

Study Notes & Comments...

In the first half of Matthew, chapter three, we were introduced to John the Baptist. We discussed his mission to prepare the hearts of the people for the coming of the Lord. “Repent,” he cried out, “For the Kingdom of God is at hand!” John spoke of the one who was coming, the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. In verse 13, Jesus arrives.

- 1) 3:13-15: Jesus arrives on the scene to be baptized by John, but John expresses surprise that Jesus wants to be baptized. “I should be baptized by you, not the other way around,” John exclaims!

John knew who Jesus was. In John (the apostle’s) gospel (John 1:29-36), the Baptist refers to Jesus repeatedly as the “Lamb of God,” who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Passover Lamb (see Exodus 12 & 13) – and as such he is spotless – without sin. John’s baptism was for the repentance of sins – but **Jesus had no sin**, and John understood that Jesus did not need to repent for anything.

But Jesus’ purpose in baptism was not for repentance, but for fulfillment. You see, in order to represent us on the cross, Jesus had to identify with us *completely*. (we’ll see this more in chapter 4). In becoming a man, God identified with us physically as a member of the human race, but he had to identify with us spiritually, too. So Jesus, in submitting to baptism, identifies with the sinners who he has come to save. It is interesting to note that the reverse is true as well – we identify with ourselves with Jesus through baptism (symbolizing death to our flesh), as a part of our response to salvation.

- 2) 3:16-17: This passage represents the first real manifestation of the Trinity, seen together, in the gospels – the Father, the son, and the Holy Spirit all take part in this moment. Upon coming out of the water, Jesus saw the heavens ‘opened’, and the Spirit of God descended upon Jesus in bodily form (Luke 3:22) ‘like a dove.’

While Jesus was filled with the Spirit from birth, now the Holy Spirit comes *upon* him in a different way – in power. We see the same thing later with the disciples. First, they were filled with the Spirit (John 20:21-22), later they were *come upon* by the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4). **There is a difference between having the Holy Spirit *in* you and having the Spirit *upon* you.**

Notice the characteristics the power of the Holy Spirit takes – the Spirit alights on him ‘like a dove.’ While the Holy Spirit is supremely powerful, he is gentle and peaceful. Jesus, in his ministry reflects that, as well. He is a man that can calm the stormy sea, change water to wine and raise the dead, and yet his very being is the expression of humility, peace and love.

Finally, the Father is pleased with his son. Here, **God gives public testimony that Jesus is His son.**

The Temptation in the Desert

- 3) 4:1-2: In chapter 3, we saw Jesus identify with us in baptism. Now in chapter 4 Jesus will identify with us in our weakness, our suffering, and in temptation. **The Holy Spirit led Jesus into the desert for the specific purpose of being tested by the enemy.** Jesus was going to come face to face with the Devil.

To prepare, Jesus entered a prolonged period of fasting, going without food for 40 days and nights.

Jesus, of course, “became hungry,” but you must understand there is much more going on here than simple hunger. Can you or I truly understand what it means to be hungry? The Greek word used here means to ‘suffer want.’ **Jesus was suffering to the extreme.** He was weak, and every fiber of his human body cried out for sustenance. I would suggest that Jesus was now entering a period of literal starvation.

In doing some searching on the Internet, I found this quote as part of a study on starvation:

“In adult volunteers who fasted for 30 to 40 days, weight loss was marked (25% of initial weight), metabolic rate decreased, and the rate and amount of tissue protein breakdown decreased by about 30%. . . . Most body systems are affected. Achlorhydria and diarrhea are common. Heart size and cardiac output are reduced; the pulse slows and blood pressure falls. Respiratory rate and vital capacity decrease. . . . Intellect remains clear, but apathy and irritability are common. The patient feels weak. Work capacity is diminished because of muscle destruction and, eventually, is worsened by cardiorespiratory failure.”

Here’s another. . . (from the Total Health Library)

“Several years ago, four people fasted for about forty days in Paris as a protest against the nuclear arms race. These people were examined each day by a physician. Each of the four was healthy, age 26-49 and had a normal weight. During the fast, they drank only bottled water, ate nothing and took no vitamins. During the first month of the fast, they developed only minor troubles consisting of a severe episode of hiccups, abdominal cramps, slight bleeding of the gums and insomnia. After three weeks, several of the fasters began to feel light-headed when they stood up after sitting or lying down. Due to a lack of vitamins on day 38 of the fast, one person developed brain dysfunction. He had trouble thinking, was unable to control eye movement and lost his balance. Between day 34 and day 36, the fasters changed from a feeling of well-being to a feeling of feebleness. As the other three noted this feeble feeling, they all decided to break the fast at 40 days.”

It is interesting that the breaking of all these individuals was 40 days. Jesus, at this point, would have been very weak, and physically speaking, quite vulnerable.

In doing this, I believe that Jesus is identifying with our spiritual weakness toward the flesh. He has put himself in a position where his flesh is crying out to the extreme. **He identifies with us in how our own flesh cries out for satisfaction all the time.** Now, when he is at his weakest and in extreme duress, he can truly be tested, and Satan comes to try and take advantage of the situation.

- 4) 4:3-4: Now comes the critical moment. If Jesus gives in to any of the temptations the Devil places before him, he can no longer serve as a sacrifice for us on the cross! Why? Because he would be giving in to his flesh rather than being obedient to his Father.

Satan hits Jesus first where he is in the most immediate need – physical sustenance. “If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.” The Devil tempts Jesus in two ways – first, at the level of his extreme physical need, but he also tempts him on a ‘pride’ level. “If you really are the Son of God, prove it!” is essentially what Satan is saying.

Jesus response is that “man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” Jesus combats the Devil by quoting directly from scripture, in this case, Deut. 8:3. Jesus response is, of course, right on the mark. We *don’t* live by bread alone. Our life isn’t just this physical body, which is nothing more than dust. The thing that makes us who we are is more than just this physical body. **The person we are is spirit, and our spirit can only find true sustenance in God’s Word.**

- 5) 4:5-7: Again, the Devil tempts Jesus, trying to goad him into using his power for himself. Satan takes him to the ‘pinnacle’ of the temple in Jerusalem. “If you are truly the Son of God, throw yourself down!” Satan says. “See if your Father will save you” is essentially what the Devil is saying in this passage. The inference is that Jesus should act in order to test his Father in heaven.

It is interesting that the Devil quotes scripture here (Psalm 91:11-12 taken out of context) to support his argument. **Satan knows the Bible, and knows how to twist it to his own end!** This is why we also must know the Bible. We need to be able to recognize when something quoted to us from the Bible isn’t quite in context so we can combat it accordingly.

Now, if Jesus were to take the Devil up on this temptation, it would be quite a show for the people there in Jerusalem. The Temple area is the busiest area of town. Imagine Jesus throwing himself off the pinnacle of the Temple and then miraculously being caught up to safety by angels! What a show he would provide for not only the people, but the religious leaders! The problem is, in performing that act, Jesus would be bypassing the will of his Father in Heaven.

Jesus again quotes scripture in his response, speaking from Deut. 6:16.

It is foolish to say to God, “prove yourself to me.” The proof of God is all around us. It’s like saying to the air, “prove yourself to me!,” even though our very lives depend on it. Nor do we test the Lord to try to manipulate His power for our benefit. Would you throw yourself in front of a train to see if God loves you enough to save you? No, of course not! **Manipulation, through prayer or action, is not how we express our love for the Lord (or for others).** It is only motivated by only selfishness.

If we are in need of something, we simply ask the Lord with a humble heart, seeking His will, not our own. Check out Matt. 7:7-11. **God loves us, and will provide for our needs.**

- 6) 4:8-11: The Devil now offers to give Jesus power over all the kingdoms of the world. One important thing to note here isn’t so much what Jesus said in response to this, as much as what he *didn’t* say. **Jesus did not contest the fact that these kingdoms and their glory belong to Satan** (see also Luke 4:5-7). It’s important to understand that this fallen world we live in, and the glory and power of the kingdoms within it, are under the power and influence of Satan. Satan is the prince of this world (John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11). That’s why the world needs saving! (John 3:17). Jesus came to redeem us, as well as the earth, and to restore all things back to the way they *should* be – completely in tune with their creator. This will all be completed at his second coming (Dan 9:24).

How did the Devil get power over the earth? It goes back to the Garden of Eden. You see, God, in His great love, GAVE dominion of the world to Adam and Eve (Gen 1:26-30). The perfect creation was God’s gift to man. But when Adam and Eve gave in to the Devil’s temptation, dominion was given over to him (Eph 2:1). This fallen, sinful world, is now under HIS dominion.

This is not to say that God is not in control over this earth. He is, and **Satan cannot do anything that God does not allow him to** (Job 1). But, this *fallen* world has been given over to his influence. That happened the moment that Adam disobeyed God in the garden of Eden.

The Kingdom of God is a spiritual realm (John 8:23, 12:25,46, 14:27, 15:18, 16:28,33, 17:13-16, 18:36), that is *beyond* the glory of the kingdoms of this world. Jesus descended into this fallen world to rescue us, to restore us, that we might have life eternal in Him.

In verse 10, once again Jesus quotes scripture (from Deut 6:13) to refute Satan, and then he dismisses him. Jesus is then ministered to by angels.

Note that throughout this discourse, our Lord always uses scripture to refute the enemy. There is no discussion or long debate. Nor is there any display of ‘supernatural’ powers. Jesus does battle with the tempter the same way you I can – by using God’s Word as our defense. You and I are constantly under attack from the enemy. How can we expect to withstand it unscathed if we aren’t reading God’s Word? We’ve got to stay in the Word. That is how we resist the Devil!

In this study we have seen how Jesus has totally and completely identified with us. God understands what it is like to endure temptation. Not only does he understand, but he has *overcome* it. Also, don’t get the idea this was the last time Jesus was tempted. Look at what Luke says in Luke 4:13. The Devil left him until an “an opportune time.” He would be back.

Jesus identified with us in every way as a human being, so we can identify with him. He can be our savior because as our sin offering, he was perfect. Our sins have passed onto him. He represents us and we partake of him (Lev 6:24-30). When we touch him, we are made Holy.

Could you have resisted that temptation in the desert? Truly? I know I couldn’t have – especially, the food! But Jesus did. He was the *perfect* man, born without sin and born by the Spirit. In every act and word, Jesus served his Father in heaven. And now, through the Holy Spirit that resides in us, we can too.