



# John the Baptist: The Man and His Message

## Story Elements

- **Text:** Matthew 3:1-12; **Parallel Passages:** Mark 1:1-8; Luke 3:1-18
- **Setting:** circa 26 AD in the wilderness of Judea
- **Main Characters:** God and John the Baptist
- **Plot:** John the Baptist begins his ministry as the forerunner of the Messiah.
- **Key word(s):** “\_\_\_\_\_” is the key word because it encapsulates the mission of John the Baptist to the people of Israel.
- **Climax:** *Matthew 3:11* *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?* This verse shows us how, in John’s preaching, he

both called people to repentance and pointed them towards the One who would come after him.

## The Man

1. (Matt. 3:1) John the Baptist began his ministry before the Savior because he was the prophesied forerunner of the Messiah. Matthew quotes Isaiah's prophecy in Isa. 40:3, “*The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, \_\_\_\_\_ ye the way of the LORD, Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*”
2. John’s physical appearance and behavior was very eccentric, which is what we would expect from prophets that dwelt in the desert.
  - (a) (Matt. 3:4) John wore a camel-hair robe and a leather girdle (or a wide belt) These were not fashionable or comfortable, but they were durable. Such attire was associated with prophets of God (2 Ki. 1:8) who were more interested in the eternal truths of the next world than with the passing fads of this one.
  - (b) (Matt. 3:4) His diet consisted of locust and wild honey – a simple diet of a man who would often be \_\_\_\_\_ in the wilderness instead of shopping at the market.

## His Message

3. (Matt. 3:2) John's main message was twofold:
  - (a) **Repent** - repentance is more than just a change of mind – it is a change of mind that results in a changed life. John preached a repentance that was a radical turning from sin and turning to righteousness. *Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance.* (Matt. 3:8) In other words, if one claims to want to repent then their life will bear the \_\_\_\_\_ of it.
  - (b) **the kingdom of heaven is at hand** - the kingdom of heaven is a phrase found only in Matthew's gospel; it is synonymous with the kingdom of God.
    - i. Some make a distinction between “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of \_\_\_\_\_” (usually as a means to support a certain eschatological position). But Savior uses these terms synonymously, and so should we. Notice:

**Matthew 5:3** – “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the **kingdom of heaven.**” cf. **Luke 6:20** – “Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the **kingdom of God.**”

**Matthew 13:31** – “The **kingdom of heaven** is like to a grain of mustard seed...” cf. **Mark 4:30–31** – “Whereunto shall we liken the **kingdom of God?** ... It is like a grain of mustard seed...”

**Matthew 19:23–24** – Jesus says it is hard for a rich man to enter the **kingdom of heaven**, then in the very next verse says it is hard to enter the **kingdom of God**, treating them as interchangeable.

- ii. Matthew, who writes to a Jewish audience, probably used the term “kingdom of heaven” instead of “kingdom of God” because it “is a Semitic reverential \_\_\_\_\_, rooted in Jewish piety, not a reference to a different kingdom.”<sup>1</sup>

➔ So then, what is the kingdom of heaven? **It is the reign of God.** Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains: “The kingdom of God is in every true Christian. He reigns in the Church when she acknowledges Him truly. The kingdom has come, the kingdom is coming, the kingdom is yet to come. Now we must always bear that in mind. Whenever Christ is enthroned as King, the kingdom of God is come, so that, while we cannot say that He is ruling over all in the world at the present time, He is certainly ruling in that way in the hearts and lives of all His people.”<sup>2</sup>

4. (Matt. 3:5) *and were baptized of him in Jordan* - John's baptism hearkened to Old Testament ritual washing. (cf. Lev. 15:13). It symbolized a change from sinful filth to clean, living, and from old wicked ways to a new life in obedience to God. Baptism wonderfully depicts repentance: leaving the old for the \_\_\_\_\_.
5. (Matt. 3:7-10) An essential part of John's mission was to prepare the people for the Messiah's arrival. That meant shaking the religious establishment out of their self-righteous arrogance:
- (a) Many of the Pharisees believed they had a good relationship with God simply because they were \_\_\_\_\_, but John said *And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.*
- (b) Part of the coming kingdom of heaven meant judgment on the disobedient kingdom of Israel. John said, *the axe is laid unto the root of the trees.* In about 40 years after John's preaching, the \_\_\_\_\_ would be destroyed, and Israel would no longer be the agents of the kingdom. That torch would pass to the (primarily) Gentile church.
6. (Matt. 3:11-12) Additionally, John prepared the people for the Messiah's arrival magnifying Christ's ministry above his own. He showed this with two phrases:
- (a) *...he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire.* John baptized with water, but the Messiah will baptize with Spirit and \_\_\_\_\_<sup>3</sup>, showing that Jesus has unmatched spiritual authority.
- (b) *...his fan is in his hand and he shall thoroughly purge his floor.* The Messiah will separate the good from the bad, the wheat from the chaff, the repentant from the unrepentant, which shows Christ's \_\_\_\_\_ authority. (cf. John 5:22)

Charles Spurgeon: “Our Lord's teaching would act like a great winnowing fan, leaving the true by themselves, and driving off the false and worthless to utter destruction. It was so in the life of our Lord; it is so every day where he is preached. He is the Great Divider. It is his Word which separates the sinners from the saints and gathers out a people for himself.”

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**Answer Key:** Key word(s): “repent” • 1. Prepare • 2. a) fads; b) foraging • 3. a) fruit; b) i. God; ii) idiom • 4. new • 5. a) Jewish; b) temple • 6. a) fire; b) judging

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<sup>1</sup> Carson, D.A., *Expositor's Bible Commentary*

<sup>2</sup> Lloyd-Jones, Martyn, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Eerdmans, 1960) p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> There is a debate by what is meant by the baptism with fire – is it referring to the Spirit or is it referring to hellfire? I believe it is referring to the Spirit, because John is painting pictures in contrast: he baptizes with water, the Messiah with fire (which is the Spirit). cf. Acts 1:5; 2:3