

Chapter 3

Verses 1-12, open in the [wilderness of Judea](#), where the earth is dry, the terrain steep, and population scarce. Jesus' cousin, John (the Baptist), has earned a reputation as a wild man in the desert, cloaked in camel's hair, sustained by locusts and honey. He preaches a fiery gospel of repentance and invites people to baptism, crying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Why is John in the wilderness?

What does it mean to "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand?"

Why baptism?

At this moment in history, Israel exists under the mighty hand of Rome. They are overtaxed, monitored, and punished when they step out of line. Many of the religious leaders in Jerusalem have compromised to earn kickbacks and curry favor with King Herod, who had rebuilt the Temple in exchange for their loyalty.

The Jews yearned for deliverance, and they believed the Messiah would come when the people had thrown off sin and returned to God with all their hearts. When John cries, "Repent!" he is inviting Israel to 'clean up shop' to prepare for the coming king. (Matthew's allusion to Isaiah 40 in 3:3 is one more blinking light to tell us, "This is the guy we've been waiting for!")

The wilderness is a significant place for Israel. It's the dry desert place is where God forms and prepares His people and establishes His covenant. John's ministry in the wilderness is both a statement *against* the political corruption of Jerusalem and a call to remember Israel's history of deliverance.

As for baptism, water always represented cleansing. Through baptism, John is washing away their grime and dirt (outward *and* inward) and giving them a fresh start with God.

John starts to gain a following. We're told people flock to the Jordan River from Jerusalem and Judea. They're ready for the revolution. But when the Pharisees and Sadducees, the ultra-religious, come to the water, John offers a stern warning:

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham."

Do you know anyone who attends church and claims to be a Christian, but whose life looks *nothing* like Jesus? That's what John is calling out—the hypocrisy of the religious insiders. What matters is not their status as card-carrying sons of Abraham, but the inside-out, transforming work of God that leads to generosity, compassion, justice, righteousness.

He goes on: *I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*

Yikes. Here's what he's saying: "I'm just the warm up act. I'm washing you with water, but he will cleanse you with God's Spirit and fire." Fire tests and purifies. It eliminates dross and leaves what's left shiny and clean.

We don't live in an agrarian society, so we likely miss the meaning of the threshing metaphor. At the harvest, a farmer would gather his grain and "thresh" it, a process by which the kernel is broken down and separated into two parts: wheat and chaff. The entire crop is then tossed into the air with a fork. The wheat is substantial, heavier, and falls straight to the ground. This is the only part that's good for food. The chaff is light and airy. It's utterly useless and floats away in the wind. John is saying, "The one who is coming will expose us. He will reveal what is good, solid, and true, and dispose of everything else so that all that is left is what's good."

"Unquenchable fire" sounds awfully harsh. But chaff is not useful for *anything*. It's a waste. Like dust bunnies collecting in the corner. What else is He supposed to do with this? John's call to repentance is for them *and* for us: Turn around. Walk toward God. And for heaven's sake, don't be the chaff.

His message is striking. It doesn't jive with the soft and friendly Jesus we often peddle in religious circles. But maybe that's the point: The coming King is not all-affirming, here to tell us we're doing just fine, carry on. But who wants that anyway when we know deep in our bones that all is not well in the world? The coming king will bring mercy, but he will also bring justice. He will bring love, but not without truth. The challenge for *us* is how we will receive him when he comes.

Questions:

- If John directed his gaze at you, and said, "Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight," how would you prepare for the Lord's arrival?

- What do you need to turn away from in order to return to Jesus?

Read Matthew 3:13-17 three times, slowly. Imagine what it would look like and sound like, if you were there.

When Jesus arrives, it's almost anticlimactic. John had led us to expect a warrior king, ready to whip Israel into shape. Instead, a humble figure appears at the water's edge, asking to be baptized, like everybody else.

John rebuffs Jesus: *"I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"*

But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."

Eugene Peterson translates Jesus's response in "The Message" like this:

But Jesus insisted. "Do it. God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism." So John did it.

Here's what that means: In Exodus, Israel passed through the waters as they left Egypt. They camped in the wilderness where God gave them His Covenant and declared that Israel was God's beloved son, His firstborn. Now Jesus passes through the waters of baptism and is declared to be God's "beloved Son."

Jesus is following the path of Israel. His baptism is one instance among many Matthew records to establish that Jesus represents Israel *as it should be*. He is the fulfillment of God's hopes for his people. For a full list of these parallels, [check this out](#). Again, one more way the biblical writers are far more intelligent than usually given credit for.

As Jesus emerges from the water, the Spirit of God breaks through like a dove. As the Spirit hovered over the waters at creation (Genesis 1), so the Spirit hovers here again. God is doing something new.

Then a voice from heaven says, *"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."*

This moment affirms the *core* of Jesus' identity. This is who he is.

When we follow his lead, through the waters of repentance and renewal, we hear echoes of that same voice speaking over us that we too are the beloved sons and daughters of God.

Questions:

- Have you been baptized? What touches or strikes you about that experience?
- Do you hear the voice of God affirming that you are his beloved son or daughter? What gets in the way of you believing that is the core of your identity?

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Chapter 4 - Read verses 1-11 - On the heels of this exultant moment, Jesus is led into the wilderness. But did you catch who leads him there? It's not the devil. It's the Spirit who leads him there *to be tempted* by the devil. What? Why would the Spirit lead someone to the wilderness in order to be tempted? That seems like a setup.

The Greek word for tempt is *peirazō*. It means to test or examine, to prove what something is made of.