

The Gospel of Matthew
Week Three
Matthew 3:1-4:11

Day One

1 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea 2 and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." 3 This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" 4 John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.

vs. 1&2 – Matthew didn't write about the period from Jesus' birth to the start of His public ministry. There would not have been much prophetic fulfillment in those years, so Matthew stayed true to his purpose and included material that would help him make his case – that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel. He was not interested in writing a historical biography that covered all of Jesus' life. He wanted to prove to his people that Jesus was the Messiah. I admire his focus as writer.

Matthew gave no background on John the Baptist, who suddenly appeared on the scene, preaching in the Judean desert. What was John's message? It was one of repentance. Something new and fresh was coming, and it required that people turn from the way they were heading and move in another direction. It also required that people change their ways of thinking, which is what repentance means.

Why was (and is) repentance necessary? It was required because the kingdom of heaven was (and is) coming! Notice that Matthew made reference to the kingdom of heaven and not the kingdom of God. No Jew was comfortable using God's name, so Matthew substituted heaven for God. There is no difference between the kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God.

My standard definition for the kingdom of God is one that I got from a seminary professor. He defined it as the government of God. God was initiating a new relationship with His people that would individualize His rule in each person's heart. John came to prepare the way to enable that to happen.

v. 3 – John the Baptist was a man of purpose and his purpose was to prepare the way and make straight paths for Jesus. A case can be made that every character in the Bible had a specific purpose and their legacy was that they fulfilled that purpose. John was no exception. His purpose was expressed in a verse from Isaiah 40:3. I have taught over the years that you not only have a purpose but also a passage from the Bible that defines who you are and what you do best. **What is your purpose? What is your defining passage of Scripture?**

v. 4 – Matthew painted a graphic picture of the eccentric John. He had a strange outfit and weird diet. Yet God used him. I have all too often avoided the messenger because I

didn't like the packaging, so to speak, and consequently missed the message. God will use some strange people and I must not allow their exterior to keep me from an appreciation of God's purpose in their lives.

Day Two

5 People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. 6 Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. 7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

v. 5 – I recently visited a site in Israel that could have been where John did some or most of his baptizing. It is a remote area today, so it must have been even more remote in John's day. People had to make an effort to get to where John was; God did not make it easy on them to come and do what they needed to do. If they came in winter, it would have been cold. If they came in summer, it would have been hot, for the region is in the desert.

So let's summarize: John was a bit eccentric with a strange diet and outlandish outfit and ministered in a remote, deserted region. Yet everyone came to see him! **Why?** It was because God stirred their hearts. It had been almost 400 years since the prophet Malachi had penned his book and the word of the Lord was scarce. Now, however, God was "moving" and everyone was moving with Him.

Remember the point I made that in the Christmas story: God set everyone in motion and often people were inconvenienced to be part of what God was doing. When John began his ministry, God put everyone in motion again. **Are you moving? Where are you going? Why are you going there? If you aren't in motion doing what God wants, then what are you doing? Are you serving God at your convenience?**

v. 6 – I wonder what sins the people confessed? They didn't have a New Testament awareness of sin, so I would imagine they were expressing their sins in regards to the Ten Commandments. It is interesting that God made the people more sin-conscious as He also made them more God-conscious. You cannot approach a holy God without facing your own unworthiness and sinfulness. When you do and repent, it is then that you can access and appreciate God's grace.

I wonder how John began baptizing? I would assume that baptism was, if not a common action in John's day, at least a practice of which people were aware. **My question, though, is how did John know that he was supposed to baptize? Why didn't he just preach and teach?** God must have clearly revealed to him that baptism was what he had to do to awaken the people spiritually.

When people have asked me why they need to be baptized, I explain what I know from Scripture. Then I finish it by saying, "Because God said you must." If God would have

told us to be baptized upside down in milk, then that's what we must do. Fortunately, he did not tell us to do that, but He did command us to bury ourselves in the waters of baptism and be raised to newness of life. What's more, baptism was and is an expression that God's government is working in your life. Have you been water baptized as an adult?

vs. 7&8 – John saw Israel's religious leaders coming and he got angry! He called them a bunch of snakes! What an insult! Of course the main "snake" or serpent was Satan in the Garden as he talked with Adam and Eve. Was John calling the leaders descendants of Satan? Notice that the leaders came to observe, not necessarily to be baptized. Religious people almost always observe but never take part in what God is doing.

John gave them good advice. If they were going to repent, then they should bring forth some fruit to prove that their repentance was real. That's still good advice today. Sorrow for sin isn't enough. God requires that you repent and change your ways. Sorrow for sin is a step in the repentance path, but it isn't the only step. If you have repented, then bring forth actions that are consistent with your new way of thinking and living.

Day Three

9 And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 10 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

v. 9 – John addressed the roots of the ethnic superiority that was to plague Israel even to this day! The Jews, or at least these leaders, felt that they were superior to everyone else because they were Jews and descendants of Abraham. John shot a hole in that thinking by stating that God could produce Abraham's children from the rocks of the ground! What another insult that must have been! The leaders saw themselves as special and John saw them as just another part of God's creation, like dirt – but that part needed to repent!

v. 10 – John issued a grave warning: God's axe was chopping and it wasn't chopping the tree but the root. If these leaders saw themselves as the root that supported and nourished God's work on earth, then that root was going to be dealt with if the fruit on that tree wasn't to God's liking. How did John say that God would deal with the root? He would cut down the entire tree and burn it! And that is just what happened four decades later when God would sack Jerusalem using the Roman army as His agents of destruction.

v. 11 – There were some who wondered whether John was the Messiah, but he dealt with that expectation early in his public ministry. He was not the one. He had a work to do

and that was to baptize in water, but One was coming, who we know was Jesus, who would baptize in the Spirit and fire. **If I gave you a choice of being baptized in fire or water, which would you choose?** Water, of course! John was saying that Jesus' "baptism" was much more intense and comprehensive. What's more, John was clear that both Jesus and His work were much more important than anything John was doing.

This is an important lesson for us as well. Don't focus more on Jesus' servants or workers more than you do Jesus! No matter what anyone does for or in God, it cannot take the place of the supremacy of God in your life! Don't give to anyone – pastor, spouse, teacher, leader, or miracle-worker – allegiance and commitment that only belongs to God.

v. 12 – First John pictured God as a woodsman cutting down a tree. Then he pictured Him as a farmer who was separating the wheat, which was valuable, for the chaff, which was worthless. His point was clear: At that point, the leaders were chaff and weren't part of God's plan for the future unless they repented and changed their ways. You and I won't be either unless we maintain the basic requirements for God's purposes: humility and dependence on Him!

Day Four

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. 14 But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15 Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. 16 As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

v. 13 – The trip from Galilee to this possible baptismal site requires about two hours by car today, so it would have been a two-day trip for Jesus back then. Once again, we see that God did not make it easy for those wanting to connect with John to do so. Yet Jesus came, unannounced, like other good Jews of His day were doing. Jesus never did anything to set himself apart from everyone else. Modern leaders would do well to do the same.

v. 14 – John recognized who Jesus was. I would think that they would have been familiar with one another, since their mothers were cousins. I would also think both men were familiar with the other's birth stories. Yet familiarity can often hinder rather than help spiritual awareness of who someone is and how God is using that person. This wasn't the case with John. He recognized Jesus' superiority and did not want to perform the baptismal ritual on Jesus. From the information we have, it seems that John certainly was a "low-ego" leader. There was nothing about him that tried to preserve or promote his ministry. Modern leaders would do well to do the same.

v. 15 – John only consented when Jesus explained why He had to be baptized, “to fulfill all righteousness.” Jesus never cut corners as God living as a Jew. He did all that was required of other Jewish men to do. He never relied on rank or privilege. Modern leaders would do well to do the same. Here is the best description of Jesus’ leadership model and philosophy:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:5-8).

Study this passage and determine for yourself how you can be a more Jesus-like leader. **What steps can you take today to be closer to the model that Jesus provided? What can you do to even be more like John?**

v. 16 – This was quite a dramatic statement from heaven! First, the heaven’s opened over Jesus. The heavens are still open over Jesus, but only over Jesus. He is the only One through whom God the Father will grant entrance or insight into heaven. **What opened heaven at this point in time?** It was Jesus’ obedience. Following Jesus and obeying Him will open heaven for you as well.

Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 5:8-10).

Then the Spirit descended like a dove. The Spirit is not a bird nor does it say that the Spirit took on the shape of a bird. Matthew reported that the Spirit descended like a bird, gradually and deliberately.

v. 17 – Then a voice spoke from heaven. Jesus is the source of heavenly communication. The Father has spoken over no other man like He did over Jesus. God the Father is pleased with God the Son; there can be no other source of godly pleasure. The Father is pleased with Jesus; then you and I should be pleased with Him as well. The Father loves Jesus; then you and I should love Him, too. The voice carried a message to encourage Jesus. Matthew recorded the voice’s message to encourage you and me as well. **Are you devoted to Jesus and Him alone as a means to God? Are you doing all you can to spread that good news that Jesus is the way, truth and life (see John 14:6).**

Day Five

1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. 2 After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. 3 The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." 4 Jesus answered, "It is

written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

v. 1 – It is interesting that Jesus was led into the desert to be tempted immediately after His baptism and voice-from-heaven affirmation. God gives you what you need to overcome whatever trials come your way. He did for Jesus and He will for you as well.

As I stated earlier, I have been in the Judean desert where Jesus was tempted, and it is magnificent and beautiful desolation. It is hot in the day and can be cold at night. Jesus went on an extended “camping” trip to a hostile area for human life and He was tempted while He was there.

v. 2 – We learn that Jesus fasted forty days and nights. This wasn't a “Daniel fast” of fruits and vegetables, which is so popular in churches today. This was a total and complete fast. Fasting means not eating. It doesn't mean not eating certain things while eating other things. It means going without food completely. It also doesn't mean giving up television or reading newspapers. It means not eating.

How often do you fast? I know I don't fast as often as I should. Yet when I do, the spiritual benefits, along with some physical ones, are fantastic. Most of the benefits for me, however, are after I fast. While I am fasting, it's hard for me to gain any spiritual benefits. Jesus was hungry after forty days because He was human. He did not refrain from eating in the strength of His divinity, but in the dedication of His humanity. If Jesus fasted, then you and I can (and should), too.

v. 3 – Matthew reported the existence of a literal devil with intelligence and the ability to communicate with a man about spiritual things. Anyone who doubts the existence of the devil is a fool, almost as big a fool as if they didn't believe in God. There can be no doubt that there is a systematic, intelligent evil force that works in human affairs and hearts. The devil isn't a fable or a concession to weak-minded and superstition-riddled ancients. He is a viable, powerful and formidable spiritual opponent of God and His people and can only be overcome in the power of God.

The devil knew that Jesus knew that He was the Son of God. Rather than try to pervert the understanding of who He was, the devil tried to pervert how Jesus expressed who He was (and is). While the devil tried to take advantage of Jesus' hunger (the devil never “fights fair”), he was more interested in Jesus applying His divine power to meet His own personal needs. Satan also used Scripture to try and create uncertainty as to how Jesus should apply that Scripture. Later Jesus would create bread from nothing, but it was to feed the hungry crowds and not to meet His own needs or to create a spectacle.

v. 4 – After each temptation, which had its root in some biblical verse or concept, Jesus replied with a much clearer and focused biblical reference. While the devil tried to get Jesus to focus the Word on Himself and His needs. Jesus focused His response on God and His requirements.

Jesus basically responded, "I am doing something more important than eating right now. I am seeking my Father and His response and love is nourishing me." Be careful how you apply and interpret God's Word. It doesn't exist just to meet your needs, but to provide guidance and insight into what pleases God. **Have you made God and His Word the means to take care of your needs, or do you use the Word as a guide for what God requires of you as you serve Him?** Don't answer too quickly.

Day Six

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 6 "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" 7 Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

v. 5 – There is always debate over whether or not the devil accomplished this through a vision or did he actually transport Jesus to Jerusalem and the highest point of the Temple. I would think it was a vision of sorts, for if this had physically happened, someone could have seen the event take place. If you disagree with me, I won't be offended. This, however, isn't the main point of the temptation. The main point is that the devil again tempted Jesus to create a show, some entertainment that would use His divine "powers" for something other than what they were intended to do. The devil wanted Jesus to "show off." Jesus saw this as being tempted to commit a reckless act, trusting that God the Father would protect Him from harm.

Have you ever done anything "stupid" and suffered the consequences, only to be angry with God because He didn't protect you? Perhaps you didn't take care of your health and got sick, only to blame God for your pain or illness. "Why did you let this happen?" you may have asked.

So the first temptation was to try and have Jesus use His power to meet His own needs. The second was to use His power to draw attention to Himself.

v. 6 – The devil had a command of Scripture, even if his applications were perverted. I heard someone say that the devil isn't in Las Vegas or some other place that we equate with sinful activity. He is in the Church, for he is at home in religious settings. I think the devil is in Vegas and the Church; he is wherever he can draw people's attention away from God.

By the way, the devil isn't omnipresent. He can't be in more than one place at a time any more than Gabriel or Michael could be. He has plenty of helpers, however, but he himself can only do so much. I doubt seriously if most of us have ever dealt with the devil himself. I believe we have dealt with his cohort demons and thus, in a sense, we have encountered the devil. What's more, I hope I never have to face him directly. He is a formidable opponent, one whom I can resist only through and with God's help.

v. 7 – Jesus was not swayed by the devil’s misapplication of Scripture. He responded with a verse that warned against testing God. It wasn’t that Jesus was averse to doing something that defied a natural law, for later in His ministry Jesus would walk on the water. The key here was that God wasn’t directing Jesus to throw Himself down, so that would have been doing something in His own power and will that would have required God to “cover” Him while He acted independently from God.

This would have been similar to what Moses did in Numbers 20. God had directed Moses to *speak* to the rock and water would come forth for the people. Moses instead *struck* the rock, yet water still came out. Moses was angry but the people probably assumed that God was angry, since Moses represented God to the people. God “covered” Moses’ act of independence and disobedience, but God didn’t let the act go unnoticed or unpunished. Due to his misrepresentation, Moses wasn’t permitted to enter the Promised Land with the people. Jesus was not about to make the same mistake and used His verse to ward off the devil’s attempts for Him to test God.

Day Seven

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 9 "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." 10 Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" 11 Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

v. 8 – Maybe there *was* a literal, physical transport to an actual location. Here again Matthew reported that the devil took Jesus somewhere, this time to a high mountain. Matthew could have written that Jesus had a vision that He was on a high mountain, but He did not write that. He wrote that the devil took Him, so I must stay true to what the Word says even though I don’t understand how the event could have taken place.

On one occasion (see Luke 4:28-30), Jesus passed right through a crowd who was trying to harm Him. How was that possible? I don’t know, but it did. So how could the devil have taken Jesus first to the Temple and then to a high mountain? I don’t now, but it did happen. I must keep my focus on the main lesson of the temptation and not on the details. You would be wise to do the same.

v. 9 – Jesus was tempted with what John referred to as “the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does” (1 John 2:16). Jesus saw the power and earthly glory of kings and their kingdoms. The devil promised to give Him the same if Jesus would worship him. Some argue that the devil was offering something he did not have the power to give. The kingdoms don’t belong to him, they argue, but to God. So Satan was lying about what he could offer to complete his end of the deal.

I tend to disagree. I think Satan *did* have something to give. I think there was earthly pomp, power and prestige that was within his power to give, for Hebrews refers to the passing pleasures of sin (see Hebrews 11: I think the devil would and could have

promoted Jesus within the kingdom of darkness to a high place, but the end would have been destruction.

Of course, this eventuality is inconceivable, for this temptation never came close to affecting the Son of God. These temptations came to prove His worth, not to question it. The Son of God took the best that the devil had to offer and resisted! He was and is perfect in every way and without sin.

v. 10 – We see the devil’s arrogance that he thought he could test the Son of God and succeed! Yet God allowed this to happen so that Jesus was shown to be a perfect man. These temptations, however, did play a role in Jesus’ learning process:

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted (Hebrews 2:14-18).

If Jesus’ temptations played an important, positive role in His life, then yours will, too.

Do you see temptations as a problem or an opportunity to prove the worth of what God has done in your life?

v. 11 – God was watching this whole scenario, for as soon as the devil left, angels were dispatched to minister to Jesus’ needs. After Jesus had stood His ground, God sent reinforcements! The devil was created to do what those angels did, and that was to minister. Instead, Lucifer or Satan chose to rebel. I am glad that those who are with us are more than those who are with him. I am also glad that God is for us and not against us as we serve Him, and that He helps us in our time of need. Aren’t you glad, too?