

# The Gospel of Matthew

## Lesson 3: John the Baptist and the Baptism of Jesus -- Matthew 3:1-17

After the quiet of Bethlehem and Nazareth, the page turns and the desert erupts with a voice. A wild figure in camel's hair, eating locusts and wild honey, stands by the Jordan River and thunders a single, jarring word: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (3:2). No temple, no robes, no soft introduction. John the Baptist looks and sounds like the prophets of old come back to life, and the crowds pour out of the cities to hear him.

There is something bracing about John. He will not flatter anyone. When the religious elite arrive to be baptized, he calls them a "brood of vipers" and warns them not to lean on their pedigree (3:7-9). He preaches a baptism of repentance, a turning of the whole life back toward God, and he insists that real repentance shows up in real fruit. John is not interested in a tidy religious ceremony performed by an unchanged heart. He is preparing a people for the arrival of their King.

And then the King arrives. Jesus walks down to the Jordan and asks to be baptized, and even John is staggered: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (3:14). The sinless One submits to a baptism for sinners, not because He needs to repent, but, He says, "to fulfill all righteousness" (3:15). In an act of stunning humility, the Son of God steps into the water alongside the very people He came to save.

What happens next is one of the most breathtaking scenes in all of Scripture. As Jesus comes up from the water, the heavens open, the Spirit of God descends like a dove, and the Father's voice declares from heaven, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (3:17). In a single moment we are given a glimpse of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit together, the God who has come to save us, standing at the threshold of the ministry that will change the world.

**Group Discussion:** John's entire message was "prepare the way of the Lord" (3:3), and the way he told people to prepare was to repent. Why do you think genuine repentance, a real turning of the heart and life, is such an essential part of getting ready to meet God, and why is it so often the part we would rather skip?

**Personal Reflection:** John insisted that true repentance produces real fruit, not just religious words (3:8). Where in your own life is there a gap between the change you say you have made and the fruit that should be showing up, and what would honest repentance look like there?

*Read Matthew 3:1-17*

## Study Questions

1. John's first recorded words are "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (3:2), and he describes a "baptism of repentance." What does the Bible mean by repentance, and why is it so central to preparing for the arrival of God's kingdom?
2. John warned the crowds to "bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (3:8). Where in your life is your talk of change running ahead of any visible fruit, and what would real, fruit-bearing repentance look like there this week?
3. When the Pharisees and Sadducees came, John refused to let them rest on their ancestry: "do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'" (3:9). What false confidences do people lean on instead of genuine repentance and obedience to God?
4. John lived a startlingly simple, single-minded life in the wilderness, wholly devoted to his mission (3:1, 4). Where has comfort, clutter, or distraction crowded out the kind of focused devotion to God that John displayed, and what might you need to let go of?
5. Jesus was sinless, yet He insisted on being baptized "to fulfill all righteousness" (3:15). Since His baptism was not for His own forgiveness, what was it for, and what does His example teach us about humbly submitting to the will of God?
6. John was content to decrease so that Jesus could increase, pointing away from himself to "he who is coming after me," whose sandals he was not worthy to carry (3:11). Where is God calling you to step out of the spotlight and point people to Christ rather than to yourself?

7. At Jesus' baptism the Father speaks from heaven, the Son comes up from the water, and the Spirit descends like a dove (3:16–17). What does this scene reveal to us about the nature of the God we worship, and why does it matter for our salvation?
8. The Father declared over Jesus, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (3:17), before Jesus had preached a single sermon or worked a single miracle. How does the Father's delight in His Son speak to the way you seek approval and identity, and where do you most need to rest in His love rather than earn it?
9. John preached a baptism of repentance, yet the New Testament later presents baptism into Christ for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; Acts 19:1–5; Romans 6:3–4). How do John's baptism and Christian baptism relate, what changed, and what does the Bible teach about the place of baptism in coming to Christ today?
10. Look back across the whole chapter: John's call to repent, Jesus' humble obedience, the voice of the Father. Name one specific way God is calling you to repent, to humble yourself, or to rest in His love as His child this week.

### **Now or Later**

**Reflect on these passages:** Isaiah 40:3–5, the voice crying in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord; Malachi 3:1, the messenger sent to prepare the way before the Lord; Acts 2:38, repentance and baptism in Jesus' name for the forgiveness of sins; Acts 19:1–5, the disciples who knew only John's baptism and were then baptized into Christ; Romans 6:3–4, baptism into Christ's death and a walk in newness of life.