

Matthew 3:1-12 (Part I)

Introduction

In this study, we're going to look at the first three verses of Matthew chapter three. But in a sense, we should really be covering the first *twelve* verses of chapter three, because the first twelve verses are *one* unit. They go *together*! So I need to admit that our stopping point this time is going to be a little artificial. We're going to talk about the kingdom ("for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"), but not about repentance ("*Repent*, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"; cf. verses 4-12). More than ever, you can't have this study without the next one. More than ever, you can't have the next study without this one. It really is all *one*. But this part of the study becomes especially important when we see that we'll never really understand Matthew and his theme of *fulfillment* without an understanding of the "*kingdom*".

As we look at these verses, we're going to keep on practicing the kind of "exegesis" that Matthew has been modeling for us in chapters one and two. In other words, we're going to keep on interpreting the Old Testament in light of its fulfillment in Christ. We're going to keep gazing upon Christ as the fulfillment of the entire Old Testament. As we do this, I hope and pray that you will see two things. First, the New Testament *everywhere* assumes the Old Testament. So the richer and deeper your knowledge of the Old Testament, the richer and deeper will be your understanding of the New Testament. And second, I hope and pray that you will begin to see the *inexhaustible* beauty of God's Word – more than you ever have before. The infinite *beauty* of God's word bears powerful witness and testimony to the infallible *truth* of God's Word!

"In those days"

Or, "Some 30 years later..."! Again we remember that Matthew has an agenda and a specific theme that he is pursuing. This is not *simply* history and biography, otherwise Matthew would not have skipped over so many years of Jesus' life in complete silence. This is *teaching* and *exhortation*. Matthew is writing for the church, and specifically so that the Jewish members of the church might know that as followers of Jesus they are the "true Jews" and the "true Israel" who will inherit all of God's promises to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

"John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea... For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness.'"

When Matthew tells us that John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, it's not so that we can pinpoint his location on a map. If that were the case, he could have been a lot more specific! You wouldn't have been able to find John just by being told that he was in the wilderness of Judea somewhere. Actually, he was technically in Perea (14:3-4; Jn. 1:28; 10:40), just on the other (east) side of the Jordan River (3:6) and probably just

a little ways north of the Dead Sea. So why is Matthew so careful to point out that he was preaching in the wilderness? Well, let's skip ahead to verse three for a moment.

“For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness.’”

So the wilderness was important for Matthew because the wilderness was important for Isaiah. But what wilderness is Isaiah talking about? Why was the wilderness important to Isaiah? Well if you're a Jew, the wilderness is first and foremost and above all else the place through which God led His people to the Promised Land after bringing them out of slavery in Egypt. You could say that the wilderness had a sort of sentimental value. But more than that, the *wilderness* came to have religious meaning and spiritual significance.

- ✓ Jeremiah 2:2-3 – Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, “Thus says the LORD, ‘I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me *in the wilderness*, in a land not sown. Israel was holy to the LORD, the firstfruits of his harvest. All who ate of it incurred guilt; disaster came upon them, declares the LORD.’”
- ✓ Jeremiah 2:6-7 – They did not say, “Where is the LORD who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us *in the wilderness*, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that none passes through, where no man dwells?” And I brought you into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and its good things.
- ✓ Amos 2:10 – Also it was I who brought you up out of the land of Egypt and led you forty years *in the wilderness*, to possess the land of the Amorite.
- ✓ Ezekiel 20:10-11 – So I led them out of the land of Egypt and brought them *into the wilderness*. I gave them my statutes and made known to them my rules, by which, if a person does them, he shall live.
- ✓ Psalms 78:52 – Then he led out his people like sheep and guided them *in the wilderness* like a flock.

For the Israelite, the wilderness had become a vivid picture or symbol of God's power to save a people who are completely vulnerable and utterly helpless to save themselves. As Jeremiah says, the wilderness is a land that none passes through, and where no man dwells. And yet God brought His people safely through the desert wilderness into a land of plenty. Wouldn't this be a wonderful story to tell your children! Not just so that they might know what God did in the past, but (as always in the Old Testament) so that they might believe what God has promised to do in the future. For one day, God said, not only would he bring His people out of Egypt the second time, but He would also lead them back into the wilderness. And the reason He would lead them back into the wilderness is because it was the *place* where He would bring about their final salvation.

- ✓ Ezekiel 20:35-38 – I will bring you *into the wilderness* of the peoples, and there I will enter into judgment with you face to face. As I entered into judgment with your fathers *in the wilderness* of the land of Egypt, so I will enter into judgment with you, declares the Lord GOD. I will make you pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant. I will purge out the rebels from among you, and those who transgress against me.

- ✓ Hosea 2:14-15 – Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her *into the wilderness*, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.
- ✓ Isaiah 43:19-21 – Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way *in the wilderness* and rivers in the desert. The wild beasts will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches, for I give water *in the wilderness*, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise.

Look what God is doing! He’s using His provisions for Israel during their first time in the wilderness (Ex. 17:1-7; Num. 20:11; 21:16-18) as a picture of the blessings that He will pour out on His people when He brings them out into the wilderness the second time! God’s provisions during the first time in the wilderness were celebrated regularly in Israel.

- ✓ Numbers 21:16-17 – And from there they continued to Beer; that is the well of which the LORD said to Moses, “Gather the people together, so that I may give them water.” Then Israel sang this song: “Spring up, O well!—Sing to it!
- ✓ Psalms 78:15-16 – He split rocks in the *wilderness* and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep. He made streams come out of the rock and caused waters to flow down like rivers.
- ✓ Psalms 105:41 – He opened the rock, and water gushed out; it flowed through the desert like a river.

But just like the second exodus will be greater than the first exodus, so also God’s salvation and provision for His people in the wilderness will be infinitely more awesome and wonderful the second time. For the wilderness will actually *become* the Promised Land! God will transform a place of death into a place that will bring abundance and joy to His people!

- ✓ Isaiah 41:18-19 – I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys. I will make the *wilderness* a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. I will put *in the wilderness* the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive. I will set in the desert the cypress, the plane and the pine together.
- ✓ Isaiah 44:3-4 – For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. They shall spring up among the grass like willows by flowing streams.

You could say that the wilderness becomes the “theater” of our salvation. It is the transformation of the desert into a watered garden that pictures the salvation God brings to His people. And it’s such a vivid and beautiful picture that it makes you want to cry and laugh and dance for joy all at the same time. But notice now that the last three Scriptures where God promises to turn the wilderness into a watered garden are all from Isaiah chapters 41, 43, and 44. And this section of Isaiah actually *begins* in chapter 40 with these words:

- ✓ Isaiah 40:1-5 – Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: “*In the wilderness* prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

And so it is no “accident” that John the Baptist came preaching *in the wilderness*. He came to announce the *coming* of Yahweh the King to bring His people out of Egypt (cf. 2:13-15), to turn the wilderness into a watered garden (cf. 2:16-18), and to pour out His Spirit and all the blessings of salvation upon His people. This is what John means when he says: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand... ‘prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight’”

Back in the “old days” when the King James Version was first published, “kingdom” could mean “kingship” or “rule” or “authority” or “sovereignty” or “reign”. Today, the English dictionaries say that this meaning of “kingdom” is now “archaic” and “obsolete”. And yet in the Bible, it is this *archaic* meaning that really lies at the heart of the “kingdom” of God. It isn’t *necessarily* a specific place or land with specific borders and boundaries so much as it is the presence and reality of the kingship, rule, power, authority, sovereignty, and reign of God. So Young’s Literal Translation says: “[Repent], for the reign of the heavens has come nigh.” And the Old Testament says things like:

- ✓ Psalm 145:13 – Your *kingdom* is an everlasting kingdom, and your *dominion* endures throughout all generations.
- ✓ Psalm 22:28 – For *kingship* belongs to the LORD, and he *rules* over the nations.
- ✓ Psalm 103:19 – The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his *kingdom rules* over all.
- ✓ Cf. Psalm 45:6; 96:10

Even though kingship, and rule, and power, and authority, and sovereignty have *always* belonged to God, and even though the Lord has *always* reigned over the earth, there was still the expectation and hope that one day the kingship and rule of God would come and be manifested in a way that it never had been before. There was always the expectation that one day Yahweh Himself would *come down*, bringing with Him the *fullness* of the blessings of His everlasting kingship and rule: The second deliverance of His people from Egypt, the second transformation of the wilderness into a watered garden, and the pouring out of His Spirit upon His people. So the synagogue service during the time of Jesus would always end with this prayer: “May God let his kingship rule in your lifetime and in your days and in the whole lifetime of the house of Israel, speedily and soon” (France).

Perhaps now we can appreciate more fully the opening words of Matthew chapter three:

“In those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea: ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand... prepare *the way of the Lord*; make *his paths* straight.’” Here in the Greek, “at hand” essentially means “arrived”. Mark says “The time is fulfilled” (1:15).

- ✓ Luke 17:20-21 – Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed [at least as you imagine], nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.”

These are revolutionary, even apocalyptic words! Mark says that Joseph of Arimathea (a faithful Jew who knew his Old Testament Scriptures) was looking for the kingdom of God (Mark 15:43). And Jesus said:

- ✓ Matthew 12:28 – If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God *has come* upon you.

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare *the way of the Lord* [Yahweh]; make *his paths* straight.’” As we will see next week, Yahweh comes whether the people prepare the way or not. It’s just that when He comes, things will be better for the people if they have prepared the way.

Conclusion

So as Matthew’s Jewish Christian audience listens to these verses being read in the church service on the Lord’s Day, what do they hear Matthew telling them through the words of John the Baptist and the prophet Isaiah?

Yahweh has come down. The kingship and rule and power and authority and sovereignty and reign of God have broken into this world in the promised Messiah – Jesus Christ. The power of Egypt is broken. God has given water in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert, to give drink to His chosen people – the people whom He formed for Himself that they might declare His praise. God has poured water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground. God has poured out His Spirit upon *us* – and all the blessings of His salvation (Eph. 1:3). *This* is what it means when John the Baptist comes preaching *in the wilderness*: “Repent, for the reign of the heavens [has arrived].” Next week, we’ll see that the “practical application” of this message is repentance. But for this week, the practical application is *rejoicing*. If as Christians we would spend more time in true, Spirit-filled rejoicing, we would without any doubt be a more obedient and holy people. So let us *rejoice* today! (A good hymn to sing here would be “Joy to the World”.) And let us also remember that even after the reign of the heavens has come, we may still pray: “Your kingdom come” (6:10). For there is coming a day when the *entire* creation will be renewed, and the kingship and rule and power and authority and sovereignty of God in Jesus Christ will be acknowledged in *all* the earth (Dan. 7:14; Obad. 21; Zech. 14:9; Rev. 11:15-17; 19:6).

Teaching our Children

- Q. Where did John the Baptist start preaching?
A. John the Baptist came preaching in the *wilderness* of Judea.
(Point out that the wilderness is desert land where crops can't grow and people can't live).
- Q. Where did the prophet Isaiah say that "John" would start his preaching?
A. In the *wilderness*!
- Q. If you were an Israelite, what would be special about the wilderness?
A. When God brought Israel out of Egypt, He led them safely through the wilderness for forty years to bring them into the Promised Land (See Scriptures under II. A.).
- Q. God said that one day He would bring His people back out into where?
A. God said that one day He would bring His people back out into the wilderness!
- Q. Why was God going to bring His people back out into the wilderness?
A. Because it was in the "wilderness" that He would save and bless His people (**See Scriptures under II. B. 2.-3. and II. C. 4.-5. and then compare with the Scriptures under II. C. 1.-3. Have FUN!**).

Now read and reflect on the passage in Isaiah from which Matthew quotes (see II. D.)

- Q. *Why* did John the Baptist come preaching *in the wilderness* – just as the prophet Isaiah had foretold? What was special or significant about this?
A. This was a sign that Yahweh was about to come ("prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight") and bring His people out of Egypt (cf. 2:13-15), turn the wilderness into a watered garden (cf. 2:16-18), and pour out His Spirit and all the blessings of salvation upon His people.
This is what John was talking about when he said that the kingdom of heaven was at hand!

Lead your children to rejoice in the truth that Yahweh has come down. The kingship and rule and power and authority and sovereignty and reign of God have broken into this world in the promised Messiah – Jesus Christ. The power of Egypt is broken. God has given water in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert, to give drink to His chosen people – the people whom He formed for Himself that they might declare His praise. God has poured water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground. God has poured out His Spirit upon *us* – and all the blessings of His salvation (Eph. 1:3).

Lead your children to pray for the day when the *entire* creation will be renewed, and the kingship and rule and power and authority and sovereignty of God in Jesus Christ will be acknowledged in *all* the earth (Dan. 7:14; Obad. 21; Zech. 14:9; Rev. 11:15-17; 19:6).