

In this chapter Matthew demonstrates that Jesus fulfilled other OT prophecies by presenting John the Baptist as the predicted forerunner of the Messiah who prepared the hearts of the people for the earthly ministry of Jesus. John preached repentance and pointed to the One Who would come after him and establish His kingdom. Jesus then comes to John to be baptized and then began His earthly ministry.

¹ In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, ² And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

“In those days came John the Baptist” – Matthew now skips from the birth and early childhood of Jesus to His adulthood. “In those days” refers to the days when Jesus had reached adulthood and by this time John the Baptist had begun his ministry. Unlike the gospel of Luke, the gospels of Matthew, Mark and John do not give us much background on John the Baptist. Matthew’s purpose in including John the Baptist in this gospel account is that he wants us to hear John’s testimony as he points to Jesus as the promised Messiah-King. **“preaching in the wilderness of Judaea”** – The wilderness of Judaea was an area just west of the Dead Sea. Since John the Baptist used the Jordan river for baptizing, he was likely near the north end of the Dead Sea where the Jordan flows into it, some 20-30 miles east of Jerusalem.

“And saying, Repent ye [to change one’s mind]” – The Greek word for “repent” refers to a change of attitude toward sin. Instead of embracing, accepting or excusing it, you now turn away from it and hate it because it displeases God. As a result, your behavior changes as you now avoid sin rather than engaging in it. Repentance is more than merely feeling guilty for your sin.

“for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” – John gives the reason for repentance: the kingdom of heaven is “at hand.” If something is “at hand” then it is within reach. John had come to prepare the people for the coming of Christ and he is warning his listeners that the kingdom of Christ was soon to become a reality because of Christ’s arrival. In fact, if the Jews had not rejected Jesus as their Messiah then He would have established His earthly kingdom at that time. The expression “kingdom of heaven” is unique to Matthew’s gospel since the other gospels use the term “kingdom of God.” Jewish writings of the time frequently used the expression “kingdom of heaven” instead of “kingdom of God” because of their reverence for the name of God, and since Matthew is writing to Jews he adopts this practice.

³ For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Matthew, as does each of the other gospels, points out that John the Baptist is the fulfillment of Isa. 40:3-5 which describes the Messiah’s forerunner who prepares the way for the arrival of the LORD as the King. The portion of the prophecy quoted here calls for the paths of the LORD to be made “straight” (straight and level), removing all hindrances to His arrival. John’s mission was to prepare the hearts of the people for the arrival of Jesus Christ so that they may accept and welcome Him. If the Jews had accepted Jesus as their Messiah then He would have established the kingdom on earth and John the Baptist would have fulfilled the scripture completely.

Notice how Jesus describes John the Baptist:

Matthew 11:10-14 (Jesus, speaking of John the Baptist) ¹⁰ For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. ¹¹ Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹² And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³ For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. ¹⁴ And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come.”

⁴ And the same John had his raiment of camel’s hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey.

John was fulfilling **Mal. 4:5** “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.” Luke records the angel’s foretelling of John’s birth and has this to say about him in **Luke 1:17**: “And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Knowing these things, John may have consciously patterned his dress, diet and behavior after Elijah. He apparently had few luxuries in his life, instead making obedience to the task that God had for him to do his priority. In Luke 1:15 the angel had also said that John would be filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother’s womb, so apparently John’s lifestyle choices were governed by the Holy Spirit.

⁵ Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, ⁶ And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.

The fact that John was the first prophet in Israel in 400 years must have drawn curiosity seekers and those yearning to hear from God from the regions near the wilderness where he was preaching. Those who were convicted by his preaching of repentance and were looking for the coming of the Messiah willingly submitted themselves to being baptized by John. Being baptized was a symbol of repentance and a washing away of sin.

Verses 7-10: John’s baptism was one of repentance, so when he saw the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his repentance he rebukes them for their hypocrisy. The Pharisees trusted in their own righteousness and therefore did not believe they needed to repent, while the Sadducees believed that only the Pentateuch was authoritative and therefore did not believe in the coming judgment of God revealed in other OT scriptures. John preaches a message of the imminent judgment of God and true repentance to them, symbolizing God’s judgment as a fire and warning them not to trust in the fact that they were descendants of Abraham to save them.

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:

“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance” – John is acknowledging the limits of his baptism, which is only symbolic of repentance. His baptism cannot be compared to the baptism that will be performed by the One Who is coming (the Messiah).

“but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear” – John humbly points to the Messiah (“the Christ”) that is soon coming, for His ministry will be far superior to John’s. John considers himself unworthy of even performing the slave’s task of carrying his Master’s shoes.

“he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire” – Pentecostals love to talk about being “baptized with the Holy Ghost and fire” as if they are both part of the same thing. Apparently they believe John is referring to the tongues of fire that will appear on the Day of Pentecost (Acts. 2:3). However, the context reveals that “fire” refers to something else entirely. Since vs. 10 and 12 use “fire” in the sense of judgment, it would be odd to view the “fire” in v. 11 in any other way. John is saying that Christ will baptize each individual in his audience in either of two ways. Those who have repented will be baptized with the Holy Ghost (salvation) and those who have not repented will be baptized in the fires of judgment (hell).

¹² Whose fan *is* in his hand, and he will throughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

John continues the theme of judgment using the illustration of winnowing wheat. In that day harvesters would use hand-held fans to separate the chaff from the grain while someone would throw the wheat up into the air. John is saying that Christ will separate the wheat from the chaff, gathering the wheat (the repentant) into His garner (His kingdom) and the chaff (the unrepentant) will be burned (in hell).

¹³ Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him. ¹⁴ But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?

“Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him” – John’s baptism was for people who needed to repent of their sins and so the last person John expected to see coming to be baptized was the Christ that he had been preaching about.

“But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?” – John questions why Jesus would come to him to be baptized. John knew that he had his own need for repentance and thus needed to be baptized by Jesus. Jesus, on the other hand, had no sins and therefore had no need to repent. So why had Jesus come to be baptized?

¹⁵ And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer *it to be* so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered him.

“And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer [permit; to not hinder] it to be so now” – Jesus asks John to do as He asks on this occasion despite the apparent contradiction. He seems to be acknowledging John’s logic by not contradicting the assertion that Jesus had no need to be baptized. However, Jesus points out that there is a higher principle at work at this time.

“for thus [in this manner] it becometh [fitting; appropriate] us to fulfil all righteousness” – Jesus says that “thus” (in this manner – by baptizing Jesus even though He had no need to repent) it was fitting to fulfill all righteousness. Being baptized was a righteous act and it was always right to do righteous acts. Also, God had sent John to baptize and God had sent Jesus to be baptized and obedience to God is always righteous. God had apparently sent Jesus to be baptized in order that He might identify Himself with sinful humanity and thus be a faithful Savior. **Heb. 2:17** “Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.”

“Then he suffered him” – Once Jesus explained that it would be a righteous act for Him to be baptized by John and not a pointless and empty one, John agrees to baptize Him.

¹⁶ And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: ¹⁷ And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

“And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway [immediately] out of the water” – Jesus leaves the water immediately after being baptized by John. Luke adds that Jesus was praying (Luke 3:21) so apparently Jesus came back to the shore of the Jordan river, kneels to pray and then the Spirit descends on Him.

“and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him” – The heavens were opened, presumably to allow the Holy Spirit to exit and come to Jesus on earth. Obviously the Holy Spirit does not need a physical opening to pass through but the imagery is no doubt used for our benefit and possibly for the benefit of Jesus in the limitations of a human body.

“and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him” – It does not say that the Holy Spirit was a dove but that He descended “like” a dove. In Luke 3:22 it says that the Spirit descended in “bodily shape like a dove” so apparently the Spirit took the physical form of a dove or at least resembled one in its shape and behavior. The phrase “he saw the Spirit of God” implies that only Jesus saw the Spirit descending like a dove and perhaps the voice, but it seems that John the Baptist also saw the Spirit according to **John 1:32** “And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him.” Isaiah predicts that God would put his Spirit on His Servant and that is what happens here at the baptism of Jesus (**Isa. 42:1** “Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles.”).

“And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” – Matthew adds to the mountain of evidence he’s been accumulating that Jesus is the Messiah with the testimony of God Himself that Jesus is His Son and that He is pleased with Him in all respects. The voice of God also fulfills Isaiah 42:1.