

Week 3: Matthew 3

Hook



Main Point: Jesus is the Son of God, who came to bring the kingdom of heaven.

Kings and kingdoms have been a part of human history since the book of Genesis. In today's culture, we are fascinated about both fictional and historical rulers and their kingdoms. You can find stories about royalty in books, television, movies and even in the news. So, let me ask you:

Q: Who is your favorite person of royalty (fictional or real)?

Q: Who is your least favorite person of royalty (fictional or real)?

Q: What word or phrase characterizes that person's rule and reign?

Teacher: write the answers from your group on the board as we will return to them in the TOOK portion of the lesson

Transition: In Matthew 3, we see the inauguration of a new kind of king. This king came to bring a new kingdom. This king is Jesus, and His kingdom is far greater than any other kingdom that the world has ever seen. He truly is the King of all Kings. Before His inauguration, Jesus' forerunner prepares the way.

Week 3: Matthew 3:1–17

Book

Main Point: Jesus is the Son of God, who came to bring the Kingdom of Heaven.

Matthew 3:1–6 [Read]

Talking Point 1: John the Baptist is the forerunner of Jesus.

Q: What does it mean for someone to be a forerunner? Can you think of any examples?

Verse 1 catches us up on the timeline of Jesus' life – “in those days” refers to the events that follow in chapter 3; Jesus is no longer a child, and He is about to begin His earthly ministry. It's here that we meet a relative of Jesus, John. Known as John the Baptist, he preached in the wilderness of Judea, an area south of Jerusalem.

John the Baptist was a forerunner, a preacher who went before Jesus and proclaimed God's message – namely, the people needed to repent to enter the kingdom of God. The word “repent” calls for a change both in behavior and one's way of life, a complete overhaul.ⁱ This kind of shift was necessary because the Messiah was on His way and the kingdom of heaven (kingdom of God) was coming.

The kingdom of heaven was not a foreign concept to the Jewish people. A popular view among them was that the kingdom would be a physical one, a new political power that would be accompanied by financial prosperity.ⁱⁱ The people of Israel had been waiting eagerly to free themselves from the rule of other nations – the thought of the kingdom of heaven, a return of Jewish rule, was attractive.ⁱⁱⁱ

However, the kingdom of heaven is not so simple. It is an “already, not yet” concept. Certainly, upon Jesus' Second Coming, all promises will be fulfilled regarding a physical rule on the earth. However, John the Baptist's message reminds us that the kingdom is not just in the future; through Jesus, mankind had the opportunity to experience God's rule in their own lives. God's people needed to prepare themselves for the arrival of Jesus.

This idea might remind you of the circle “God's Design” in the 3 Circles method of evangelism. God has a plan in mind for your work, family life, marriage, friendships – He wants to lead you in every area of your existence. You have the opportunity today, no matter your circumstances, to enjoy God's rule and the blessings that accompany it.

Jesus tells us in John 10:10 that He has come that we might have life and have it abundantly.

John the Baptist's purpose is summed up in the Scripture reference in verse 3, Isaiah 40:3 – a passage in which construction workers are called to make a clear path for Yahweh to return with His people, who were at that time in captivity in Babylon, to Judah.^{iv} And now John the Baptist called the people to remove obstacles from their own lives to make way for Jesus and the kingdom of heaven. Both hearts and lives would need to be changed for the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah.^v

John the Baptist certainly looked the part of a prophet (v. 4). His appearance was reminiscent of Elijah (2 Kings 1:8), clothes made of camel's hair and a leather belt to collect his outer garment. This style of dressing and choice of food (locusts and wild honey) were the clothes and diet of a poor person and served as a uniform of sorts for a prophet (Matthew 11:8–9; Zechariah 13:4). John the Baptist's way of living confirmed his message, giving weight to the singularity of his purpose. As one commentator put it "Even the food and dress of John the Baptist preached."^{vi} And people listened, coming from a wide area to hear the one in the wilderness.

Q: What was John calling the people of Israel to do?

- **What does it mean to repent? (turning from sin and to God; change in heart leading to a change in action)**
- **What is confession? (saying about your sin what God says about your sin)**
 - **What is baptism? (an outward expression of an inward life-change)**

Q: What are some of the promises of God that believers have "ALREADY" experienced? What are some of the promises of God that believers have "NOT YET" experienced?

Q: In what ways can you "prepare the way" for Jesus in the lives of those around you?

Matthew 3:7–12 [Read]

Talking Point 2: The coming of the king offers entrance into the kingdom or eternal judgment.

Q: Have you ever travelled internationally? How do you prove your citizenship of the United States?

Q: What is the proof of citizenship in the kingdom of Heaven?

Not everyone who came to hear John the Baptist believed his message. Included among the crowds were the religious leaders, Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees were lay leaders connected with local synagogues. They were popular among the people, taught the law, were larger in number than the Sadducees, and held a minority role in the religious ruling body, the Sanhedrin.^{vii} Pharisees developed the oral law, providing detailed ways in which one was to interpret and apply the Scriptures to daily living. Pharisees had no love for Rome, viewing the Romans as illegitimate leaders in the Promised Land.^{viii} Sadducees, on the other hand, were an aristocratic and priestly group who supported Rome and held the majority of the seats on the Sanhedrin. There was a chasm between Sadducees and the common people, both politically and economically.^{ix} The Sadducees believed only doctrine that traced back to the first five books of the Bible, thus they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead (that made them “sad u cee” – Dad joke).^x

Though diametrically opposed on certain topics, these two groups united in opposition to the message of Jesus. John the Baptist lumps them together as he addresses them as the official leadership of Judaism.^{xi} Although they are among the crowds listening, they have no intention of heeding John the Baptist’s message. They are pretenders.

John the Baptist takes note of their hypocrisy and addresses them harshly. They are fakes among the converts, like vipers – devious, subtle and dangerous.^{xii} John asks them in sarcasm who warned them to flee from the wrath that will accompany the full arrival of the kingdom; he knows that they have not believed the message (v. 7).

Verses 8 through 10 challenge the religious leaders’ thought that their bloodline is enough to enter the kingdom of heaven. Instead, John the Baptist says that repentance, which is necessary, is accompanied by a change in behavior – bearing fruit (v. 8). There was a notion among Israelites in this time that the merits of the patriarchs would be enough for the right-standing of their descendants.^{xiii} John the Baptist dispels this myth; being descended from Abraham isn’t enough – in fact, it’s not even a requirement to enter the kingdom. God could raise up stones (not uncommon in the bed of a river where John the Baptist would have been) to become totally legitimate, authentic children for Abraham.^{xiv} The kingdom is for anyone. Verse 10 once again reminds the religious leaders that judgment is coming for those who do not accept the message.

John the Baptist compares his ministry to that of Jesus in verse 11, demonstrating a self-awareness and humility. He recognizes that he is not worthy to carry the sandals of Jesus; this is not self-degradation but simply a healthy understanding of the significance of Jesus compared to John’s place as a servant of the king.

The comparison continues as John describes the uniqueness of Jesus' baptism – it will be unlike John the Baptist's baptism. John is preparing the people for Jesus, a baptism of repentance in anticipating the Savior. Jesus, however, would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, going further than John, offering purification and refinement. ^{xv}

And there would be a clear line drawn between those who had experienced that baptism and those who refused. John the Baptist used the metaphor of Jesus' using a winnowing fork, an agricultural tool used to toss wheat into the air. The grain would fall to the ground and the chaff would blow away. Jesus' arrival would, in fact, separate the wheat from the chaff, dividing those who have repented and experienced the new birth from those who have not. The judgment waiting for those who are apart from Christ is an unquenchable fire – hell.

Let us not forget the gravity of the situation. As Christ's ambassadors, we have the privilege of carrying the Gospel message forward. Sharing our faith is more than a demonstration of obedience to Christ's commands. It's a tool by which your friends, family and strangers are introduced to a life-saving message. There are eternal consequences apart from Christ. Paul understood the magnitude, anguishing over his Jewish brothers and sisters who rejected Jesus; he wished that he could take on the punishment for them that they might be saved (Romans 9:3). Do you have that kind of compassion for the lost? That kind of a heartbreak for the lost begins with a sober understanding of their destiny.

Q: What does it take for a person to enter the kingdom of heaven?

Q: In what ways have you ever felt like a hypocrite? What can we learn from the mistakes of the Sadducees and Pharisees?

Q: Why might John the Baptist's message of judgment be surprising to his Jewish audience? Why might it be surprising to our culture today?

Q: What makes the Christian's duty to share the Gospel so urgent?

Matthew 3:13–17 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Jesus' ministry was endorsed by the Father, empowered by the Spirit, and rooted in obedience and love.

Q: What does it mean to endorse something or someone? Do you have any examples?

This scene marks the inauguration of Jesus' ministry, an awe-inspiring event that changed the world. Yet, it began to unfold in an unceremonious way. John the Baptist, of whom Jesus said was the greatest man born of woman (Matthew 11:11), had promised that the Coming One would be much greater, baptizing in fire and the Spirit. Imagine the anticipation of the people, the kind of figure that they would have anticipated! Certainly, the Coming One would have made quite a scene upon His entrance!

However, verse 13 tells us that Jesus (a lone figure) arrived from Galilee. The sentence seems so unassuming – a man, by himself, arrives from an agricultural region of little consequence.^{xvi} But the moment is not lost on John the Baptist. He knows exactly who Jesus is and is shocked at the idea of baptizing the Messiah! Jesus has no need to repent because He is without sin. John the Baptist believes that Jesus should be baptizing him!

Jesus would be baptized, but not in expression of repentance. No, Jesus would be baptized to “fulfill all righteousness” – meaning that He would be baptized to “complete everything that forms part of a relationship of obedience to God.”^{xvii} God had a plan of salvation – of rescue – in mind from the beginning, and Jesus, with the inauguration of His ministry, is fulfilling that plan, which will eventually lead to the Cross. Jesus will be obedient to God's plan.^{xviii}

In being baptized by John the Baptist, Jesus is also endorsing John the Baptist's message as one who had come from God, not a plan of John the Baptist's own devising. John the Baptist was a truth-teller, and his message was one to be obeyed. Further, in being baptized, Jesus identifies with the people that He has come to rescue. As we said before, Jesus is very much “God with us,” choosing to connect with us.

Not only was John the Baptist's message endorsed, but so, too, was Jesus and His ministry in verses 16–17. Following His baptism, we see a beautiful picture of the Trinity. The Spirit did not take the form of a literal dove; He manifested to descend on Jesus. The dove was a symbol often associated with peace and gentleness, not judgment.^{xix} And it's the Spirit who anoints Jesus, coronating Him as King and commissioning Him for the work that He will accomplish (see Isaiah 42:1–4, Isaiah 11:2, Isaiah 61:1).^{xx} This is both a visual confirmation of Jesus' identity and a formal marker of the inauguration of His ministry (John 1:32–24).

The Father speaks “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (v. 17). God is not adopting Jesus as Son in this moment, because their relationship has always existed. Instead, the message confirms the relationship and points out that at the center of it is love.^{xxi} Further, the message is reminiscent of Isaiah 42:1, confirming that Jesus is the

Suffering Servant – the one who will bring justice to the nations through the power of the Spirit.^{xxii} This Jesus will bring about the work of salvation.

These few verses contain books' worth of theology, but take a moment to soak in the obedience of Jesus. His mission begins in these moments and it will certainly be an arduous one. Yet, despite the challenges ahead, Jesus purposed His time on earth to be obedient to the mission – He would give His life to usher in a new kingdom – one in which all would be offered entrance.

Q: Why was Jesus baptized? Why should believers be baptized?

Q: What virtue did John the Baptist display in his response to Jesus' question to baptize Him? How can we imitate this virtue in serving Christ?

Q: What was Jesus' attitude toward obedience? What can we learn from it?

Week 3: Matthew 3:1–17

Took

Main Point: Jesus is the Son of God, who came to bring the kingdom of heaven.

Look back at your answers on the board. Observe the different people of royalty that your group thought of at the beginning of the lesson. Now, write “Kingdom of Heaven” to the side of the previous answers.

Q: What are some of the characteristics of the kingdom of heaven? (Write your group’s answers on the board.)

Q: Compare and contrast these characteristics from the worldly kingdoms that we discussed earlier. (Circle the characteristics that are the same and put a line through characteristics that are different.)

Q: Why is Jesus’ bringing the kingdom of heaven to earth of the utmost importance?

“Jesus is the Son of God who came to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth” is monumental news. This news is called the Gospel. The word *Gospel* literally means “good news.” The reason it is Good News is because Jesus extends everyone an invitation to enter His Kingdom.

No one is outside of the King of heaven’s grasp. However, in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, a person must surrender his or her life to the one true king: Jesus.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Am I living as a glad-hearted citizen of the kingdom of heaven? Am I living surrendered to Jesus? Is my spiritual life characterized by apathy, indifference and laziness? Or am I gladly and whole-heartedly obeying Christ’s commands by the power of the Holy Spirit? Am I bearing fruit in keeping with repentance?

PRAY: Ask the Holy Spirit to help you be obedient to Christ’s commands this week. The Christian life, following Jesus’ example, is obedience rooted in steadfast love and faithfulness. All of this, like Jesus’s ministry, is empowered by the Holy Spirit. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in righteousness, kindness and holiness this week as you live as a citizen of the kingdom of heaven.

ACT: Gladly surrender your life to King Jesus each and every day this week. What areas of your life are you trying to guard, control, or conceal? Finances? Career success?

Relationships? King Jesus is sovereign over all areas of your life. He knows what is best for you and desires your glad-hearted submission to His lordship. What specific area of your life will you relinquish control of to Jesus this week?

Hook, Took & Editing by Peyton Coker

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