

**Matthew 3:1 ¶ In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea,  
Matthew 3:2 And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.  
Matthew 3:3 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.**

“In those days” – The days when Jesus was dwelling in Nazareth. We know from Luke’s gospel that John and Jesus were cousins, and John was the oldest by at least six months.

*Luke 1:36 “And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren.”*

Obviously, John was a grown man and was already out serving God in his appointed ministry, which means that Jesus was also an adult at this time. John’s ministry was focused in the wilderness area of Judea, an area defined by the NIV Commentary as, “including the lower Jordan Valley north of the Dead Sea and the country immediately west of the Dead Sea.”

John was known as “John the Baptist” because he was preaching a message of repentance and baptizing those who came forward in response to his message. That message: “Repent ye: for the king of heaven is at hand.” As far as John was concerned, the Messiah would soon come to establish His kingdom. The expectation of most Jews was that the Messiah would deliver them from Rome and take the throne of David. As it so often does, this expectation becomes a stumbling block to the faith of many.

Matthew again notes the fulfillment of prophecy recorded in scripture.

*Isaiah 40:3 “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”*

How was John preparing the way for Messiah? By getting the people to prepare their hearts to receive Him. He was coming to seek and save the lost, and only those humble enough to admit their need would willingly receive Him.

I loved Guzik’s example explaining repentance: “Is repentance something we must *do* before we can come to God? Yes and no. Repentance does not describe something we must do before we come to God; it describes what coming to God is like. If you are in New York, and I tell you to come to Los Angeles, I don’t really need to say “Leave New York and come to Los Angeles.” To come to Los Angeles *is* to leave New York, and if I haven’t left New York, I certainly haven’t come to Los Angeles. We can’t come to the kingdom of heaven unless we leave our sin and the self-life.”

**Matthew 3:4 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.  
Matthew 3:5 Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the**

**region round about Jordan,**

**Matthew 3:6 And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.**

John wasn't really concerned about the material things in life; he lived very simply. He wore a garment made of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist. His diet consisted of locusts and wild honey.

It seems that his ministry drew crowds from Jerusalem, Judea and the region around the Jordan River. Many came confessing their sins and ready to get baptized by John.

Again, Guzik posits an interesting observation: "Baptism was practiced in the Jewish community already in the form of ceremonial immersions, but typically it was only among Gentiles who wished to become Jews. For a Jew in John's day to submit to baptism was essentially to say, 'I confess that I am as far away from God as a Gentile and I need to get right with Him.'"

**Matthew 3:7 ¶ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?**

**Matthew 3:8 Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance:**

**Matthew 3:9 And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to *our* father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.**

Per Easton's Dictionary:

- Pharisees – "They were extremely accurate and minute in all matters appertaining to the law of Moses.... There was much that was sound in their creed, yet their system of religion was a form and nothing more. Theirs was a very lax morality."
- Sadducees – They ridiculed "the doctrine of the resurrection, which they denied, as they also denied the existence of angels.... They were the deists or sceptics of that age."

Together these religious leaders made up the Sanhedrin, those representing the highest Jewish court authority.

John was very aware of the different people who came to hear him. When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees in the crowd, he did not alter his message or try to be politically correct. He was blunt and aggressive in his address to them. He recognized them for the hypocrites they were and called them a generation of vipers (poisonous snakes). He was basically saying that they did more harm to God's people than good. He questioned who would have cared enough to warn them that they needed to repent in light of coming judgment. He basically said, "If you don't want to suffer God's judgment, change your way of life and testify to your love for God through humble obedience to Him and ministry to His people."

John warned the religious leaders that being a descendant of Abraham was not enough to secure their deliverance. They knew that God had made a covenant with Abraham that was yet to be fulfilled. I think the point he was making was that they were not necessary to the fulfillment of that covenant. God could create descendants from Abraham from the stones on the ground if He so chose.

**Matthew 3:10 And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.**

Next, John paints a word picture of impending judgment—"the axe is laid unto the root of the trees." His point, only the trees that produce good fruit will be saved; those that do not produce good fruit will be cut down and destroyed by fire.

**Matthew 3:11 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:**

**Matthew 3:12 Whose fan *is* in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.**

In these verses John connects the judgment to the coming of the Messiah whom He proclaims. John admits that his baptism is sufficient in recognition of repentance for sins. He declares that the One for whom he is preparing the way (cf vs 2-3 above) is more powerful than He; in fact, John is not even worthy of carrying His sandals (the task of the lowliest servant). He will baptize both with the Holy Ghost and with fire.

This mighty One is pictured carrying a fan (a winnowing fork) in order to separate the wheat from the chaff, the good wheat from the part that is worthless. He will safely reserve the good wheat and will then burn up the chaff in a fire that cannot be extinguished. Being an agrarian society, the application was clear. The Messiah would come and save and empower with the Holy Spirit those who chose to repent of their sins and produce the fruits of righteousness. Those who reject Him and refuse to repent of their sins would face the judgment of eternal fire in hell.

*Ephesians 5:9 "(For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth;)"*

*Mark 9:43-44 "And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched."*

**Matthew 3:13 ¶ Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him.**

**Matthew 3:14 But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?**

We are now told that Jesus traveled from the Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized of John. John at first refused, declaring himself as the one needing to be baptized by Jesus. He basically asks Jesus, "Why do you want to do this?"

**Matthew 3:15 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.**

**Matthew 3:16 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:**

**Matthew 3:17 And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.**

Jesus tells John that what He asks is necessary to the fulfillment of God's plan; He is to set the example that all those seeking righteousness in Him should follow. So John complied with His request.

When John was bringing Jesus up from the water, the heavens opened and the Spirit of God descended like a dove to alight upon Jesus. Then a voice from heaven identifies Jesus as His beloved Son "in whom I am well pleased." It is not clear who all sees the dove and hears the voice; however, I assume that at least John and Jesus do. John got a divine affirmation that he had done the right thing, and Jesus was affirmed, empowered and encouraged as He began His public ministry.