



Matthew 3—Commentary Notes*

A. Introduction

The Gospel of Matthew does not give an account of Jesus's childhood in Nazareth. Chapters one and two only mention the birth and toddler years of Jesus, and chapter three transitions directly to His preparation for public ministry. Luke's Gospel records how Jesus went with His parents to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration when He was twelve (Luke 2:41-52).¹ If we wish to gain a better understanding of the works of Jesus on earth, we need to know the four things that prepared Jesus for His public ministry: (1) the quiet life of Jesus in Nazareth, (2) the work of preparation by John the Baptist (3:1-12), (3) the baptism of Jesus (3:13-17), and (4) the temptation of Jesus by Satan (4:1-11). This lesson will focus on the first three and reserve the fourth for the next lesson.²

B. Outline

- I. Jesus lived thirty "silent years" in Nazareth.
- II. 3:1-12 John the Baptist prepared the way for the Lord and proclaimed the coming of Jesus the Messiah.
- III. 3:13-17 The Holy Spirit and the Father testified together that Jesus was the Son of God at His baptism.

C. Content

I. Jesus lived thirty "silent years" in Nazareth.

The Lord Jesus descended from heaven to be the Savior of humankind. Yet for almost thirty years, other than traveling to Jerusalem for important festivals, Jesus stayed in a little village of Nazareth in Galilee. What was God's purpose in keeping the Lord Jesus from the public eye? What took place in those silent years?

- 1. Jesus grew up in a godly environment.
Jesus grew up in a home that loved and feared God. Matthew 1 described the trust and obedience that His mother, Mary, and His father, Joseph, had towards the will of God (1:24; 2:13-14, 19-22; Luke 1:38, 46-56). They raised Jesus according to God's will for Him.
- 2. Jesus fulfilled His duties and responsibilities as the firstborn son.
It was very possible that Joseph died before his children became of age. We notice that only Mary attended the wedding feast at Cana since Joseph was not named or mentioned. Therefore, we assume that Joseph had already passed at that time. Jesus took up the responsibilities of a father and worked as a carpenter in Nazareth in order to support his mother and younger siblings. Even though Jesus never married, He felt the burden of maintaining the livelihood of a family.
- 3. Jesus experienced and learned the sufferings of a worker of God.

* Translator Note: These Commentary Notes were originally compiled in Chinese and translated into English for use by Chinese Christian Fellowship International's (CCF International's) English classes. All sources listed in the table (only listed in English when applicable) at the end of these notes were used and consulted in the original Chinese compilation. Please refer to the table for the references of each numbered annotation. For more information on the sources consulted, please contact CCF International. All biblical references are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® NIV® Copyright © 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

The Lord Jesus was equal with God, yet He became an ordinary man for our sake. He did not live a life of comfort like a king. Instead, He suffered all kinds of trials and testing but was without sin. This is why He can sympathize with our weaknesses. He knows how to rescue and help us in overcoming all sins and temptations (Heb 4:15-16). The Lord Jesus experienced economic and work pressures and challenges in life. Perhaps He also faced demanding and unreasonable customers as well as difficult issues at home. It was God's intent for Jesus to experience such a life because He was to become our atoning High Priest (Heb 2:17-18; 5:8-9).

4. Jesus was faithful in the little things and was therefore entrusted by God with a greater mission. The quiet life and work of the Lord Jesus in Nazareth trained Him to be faithful in every little matter. Therefore, He was able to face the immense difficulties and struggles in His three years of public ministry. In the same way, God equips His servants today to be faithful in the small things before He entrusts them with greater tasks.³

Today, as you face a life of scarcity, difficult family members, or the loss of health, do you contemplate ways of escape or are you willing to accept your responsibilities? God comforts and encourages us with the thirty silent and hidden years of Jesus. He commissions those who are faithful in small matters and steadfast in the midst of difficulties.

II. 3:1-12 John the Baptist prepared the way for the Lord and proclaimed the coming of Jesus the Messiah.

John the Baptist proclaimed the coming of the Messianic kingdom. Yet the prerequisite to enter is for man to repent and return to God. One of the spiritual blessings that God gave to the Jewish people was the prophetic tradition (the proclamations and presence of prophets). The Jewish prophets were called “men of God” or “seers” (1 Sam 9:6, 9), who declared the message of God with God-given authority.⁴

3:1 – The period and region of John's preaching. “In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea...” “In those days” point to the days immediately following the four hundred years of God's silence. At the same time, the silent years of the Lord Jesus, the King of the Jews, in Nazareth had also come to an end. He was now ready to go to His people.⁵ John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Lord Jesus, announced the coming of the Lord beforehand just like a messenger would do before the arrival of a king. The emergence of John the Baptist fulfilled the prophecy of Malachi. He would have the spirit and power of Elijah, and he would turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents. He would prepare the hearts of man to turn to Christ and to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit (3:11-12; Mal 4:5-6). Jesus was about thirty years of age at this time (Luke 3:23). John the Baptist, on the other hand, was probably about six months older (Luke 1:36) and lived only until thirty years of age (Mark 6:14-27).⁶ The father of John the Baptist was Zechariah and his mother was Elizabeth—both were descendants of priests. Not only was their lineage noble, they were also righteous and blameless in the sight of God. John the Baptist was God's miraculous gift to his parents in their old age. They raised and influenced him towards godliness since childhood (Luke 1:5-25, 57-80). His name, “John”—which was given by the angel and meant “the grace of God,” foretold God's purpose and plan for his life. He was not only God's gracious gift to his parents, but he was also God's grace to mankind. With his life, John the Baptist introduced God's greatest gift to the world—the Lord Jesus.⁷

The wilderness of Judea was located on the west side of the Dead Sea. It was a barren and rugged land. The Jews at that time could have ceremonially cleansed themselves in the ritual cleansing pools, but instead, John baptized them. The key question is, “Why was John the Baptist's message so powerful that it drew people from all over Judea to come, repent, and receive his baptism?” The secret was “the life of the wilderness”—his life spent drawing near to God. John the Baptist's intimate and alone time with God is similar to Paul's three years of intimate fellowship with the Lord in the Arabian wilderness after his conversion and commission on the road to Damascus. He even had the experience of being caught up to paradise (Gal 1:17-18; 2 Cor 12:2-4). “The experience of

the wilderness” causes us to share and testify about the power of the gospel to bring others to God and for transformation of their lives. The spiritual giants of Scripture all tasted sweet fellowship with the Lord. They withdrew from noisy crowds and retreated to the wilderness to draw near to the Lord. David penned Psalm 63 about his sweet communion with God in the wilderness of Judah.⁸

3:2 – The message which John the Baptist preached. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” John’s message was short and to the point. It had two parts: (1) redemption—repentance and (2) eschatology—the kingdom of heaven had come near. The Old Testament often mentioned the Messianic kingdom. However, man must repent in order to enter. This was a new concept that the Jews could not understand. They assumed that anyone who was a descendant of Abraham was qualified to enter into the Messianic kingdom. They did not understand how far off they were from the standards and demands of God’s law given through the prophets (Mal 3:7-12; Rom 3:20). John’s eschatological message referred to the Messianic kingdom prophesied by God in the Old Testament. It was now near and would be realized by the Messiah, Jesus Christ. For this reason, John the Baptist prepared the way for Him.

3:3 – The fulfillment of John the Baptist’s prophecy from the Old Testament. “This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: ‘A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’” Luke 3:5 gives a more complete quote of Isaiah 40:3-4: “Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.” The roads in Old Testament times were crooked and rugged, making travel bitterly hard. Therefore, prior to the visit of a king, people were sent to level the path. This was Isaiah’s description of John the Baptist’s task—God had sent him as a forerunner to prepare the way of Jesus the Messiah, “so that through Him all might believe” (John 1:7).⁹

For John the Baptist, “making straight paths” for the Lord meant to make ready the hearts of men. To make “the rough roads smooth” meant to humble the prideful hearts and to straighten crooked misunderstandings of salvation so that men may receive Jesus Christ. This was John’s mission. It is also the mission of Christians today¹⁰—to prepare the way for people to receive the gospel through intercession, sharing of God’s Word, and personal testimony.

3:4 – “John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.” John the Baptist lived a simple life of self-denial. He dressed like a prophet, especially resembling the prophet Elijah (2 Kgs 1:8; Zech 13:4), and he ate locusts and wild honey. “Locusts” may have been a kind of insect (Lev 11:21).¹¹ However, legend has it that the locusts could also have been a pot-like fruit from a tree, and that wild honey could have been a local jujube plant grown at that time. Nevertheless, both were food of the poor. This lifestyle of self-denial was consistent with John’s message. Perhaps he hoped that the people would observe the way he lived and would then forsake their lives of self-indulgence and pleasures. One’s godliness and humility can be seen through self-control in diet and in appropriateness of dress.¹²

3:5-6 – “People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.” Even though the Jews were familiar with the baptism of the Gentiles in converting to Judaism, it was very unusual for them to be willing to receive John’s baptism of repentance because they viewed themselves as God’s chosen people who do not need such baptism.¹³ Historically speaking, it would have been impossible for such national repentance and acceptance of John’s baptism to have taken place without the work of God.

3:7 – “But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: ‘You brood of vipers’ and asked them, ‘Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?’” John the Baptist understood the condition of the people. He sternly rebuked the crowd (Luke 3:7) even called out the Pharisees and Sadducees as “brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” They were self-righteous people who adhered to rules and traditions and overly emphasized mannerisms and rituals (Matt 15:2-3; Mark 7:8-13; Luke 18:9). The

Pharisees and Sadducees were two opposing religious branches in Jewish society. The word “Pharisee” in Hebrew means “one who is set apart” (i.e., a separatist). The Sadducees belonged to the rank of the priests. They denied supernaturalism and miracles especially concerning bodily resurrection (Mark 12:18-23; Acts 23:8). The Sadducees did not have a clear set of doctrines.¹⁴ They were but rationalists who denied supernatural power and despised formalities. These two religious sects twisted the meaning of godliness in the Jewish community.

3:8-9 – “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.” Here, John the Baptist pointed out a specific sin of the Jews: even though they were Abraham’s descendants, they ignored their corrupt lifestyles so much so that they did not resemble the faith and obedience Abraham had toward God in any way. Furthermore, John the Baptist pointed out that salvation was not guaranteed for them simply because they are Abraham’s descendants, nor can they escape God’s wrath and judgment that is to come. They perceived themselves as the only offspring of Abraham, but John the Baptist reminded them that God is able to raise up children for Abraham even out of stones.

3:10 – “The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” An ax placed at the root of a tree was a word picture that signified judgment.¹⁵ The ax was not used to trim the branches but rather to cut the tree down at the roots. Therefore, people needed to repent in order to escape the dreadful judgment that is to come.

Jesus preached John the Baptist’s message of repentance. In Hebrew, to repent means “to return” or to turn from sin and ungodly living. It is a full 180-degrees turnabout. In doing so, a person’s entire life turns away from sin and turns to God. God is now at the center of his or her life. True repentance always requires clear confession and forsaking of specific sins (Prov 28:13). Repentance is a transformation of the heart and mind, as well as lifestyle. Not only do we turn from sin and no longer sin against God as before, we also need to decide to live our daily lives according to God’s will, and to love and serve Him wholeheartedly.

Repentance is a total transformation. When people asked John the Baptist what they should do, John answered very practically. The Gospel of Luke records his detailed reply. For example, replace former selfishness and greed with a heart of generous giving (Luke 3:11), embrace honesty instead of deceit (Luke 3:12-13), act with self-control in place of violence, and have a grateful heart instead of self-pity or complaining. A truly transformed life will manifest itself in action. It is by this that others see one’s true repentance.¹⁶

3:11-12 – The baptism of John versus the baptism of Christ. “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” John the Baptist clearly explained to the crowds that came to the Jordan River how baptism is related to the baptism of the Messiah that is to come. John’s baptism was different than that of Christ in that his baptism was limited. It only represented man’s repentance and readiness to receive the arrival of the Messiah. What John the Baptist did was prepare the way of the Lord by pointing those who were willing to receive his baptism toward Christ so that they might be ready to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist later testified that Christ was God’s Son and the Lamb of God (John 1:29). Many sinners put their trust in Christ because of his testimony. John the Baptist exalted Christ in his message in several ways:

1. He exalted Christ’s position. “One who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry.” The preaching of John the Baptist was powerful. It drew people from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan to him to confess their sins and be baptized. This meant that they reckoned John as a prophet and were willing to submit to his message. Yet for John the Baptist, he humbled himself and exalted Christ Jesus instead of himself,

acknowledging that he himself was not the Christ but a forerunner for Him. He went as far as to say that he was not even worthy to carry His sandals nor to become a humble servant of Christ. He humbled himself by confessing that he was but a voice of one calling in the wilderness (John 1:23). He brought others to know Christ and gave all the glory to God. We are thus reminded to be like John the Baptist and to faithfully lead others to Jesus while setting ourselves aside, our own personal gain, and being willing to sacrifice even our reputation and status for the sake of others so that they may obtain the blessings of the gospel.¹⁷

John the Baptist further used his own baptism to explain the two “baptisms” of Christ.¹⁸

2. He foretold the baptism of the Holy Spirit. John baptized with water, but Christ will baptize with the Holy Spirit (3:11). The Jews had long been hoping for the arrival of the Holy Spirit, for God had promised that He would put His Spirit inside all who believed. “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you...And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws” (Ezek 36:26-27; 37:14; Heb 8:10-11). The baptism of the Holy Spirit prophesied by John the Baptist was realized after Jesus’s ascension and on the day of Pentecost as is recorded in Acts 2. John the Baptist’s prophecy promised that all who believed in Christ will receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit (i.e. the indwelling of the Holy Spirit). When we believe in the Lord Jesus, the Holy Spirit enters our hearts to dwell with us forever as the seal of our salvation (Eph 1:13). In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit only came upon a few people (such as prophets and kings) and only temporarily. But in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit comes upon all who put their faith in Christ and He will never depart. “And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people” (Isa 44:3; Joel 2:28).¹⁹

When the Holy Spirit enters our hearts, He opens our eyes so that we may see the truth and discern the irregularities, chaos, and lack of control in our human nature and move farther away from our blindness, biases, and darkened minds and self-understanding.²⁰ At the same time, through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, the hearts of men enter into God’s orderliness and harmony.

The New Testament mentions the baptism of the Holy Spirit seven times, six of which are directly connected to the words of John the Baptist. Apart from the four Gospel accounts that record John the Baptist’s statement that Jesus Christ will baptize with the Holy Spirit (Matt 3:11; Mark 1:7-8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33), Acts 1:5 and 11:16 also state that believers will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.²¹

3. He explained Christ’s baptism with “fire.” Malachi prophesied: “But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap” (Mal 3:2). Likewise, baptism “with fire” means to judge and purify all those who enter into the kingdom of God. John the Baptist explained this with the illustration of wheat and chaff. When grain is winnowed and the threshing floor is cleared, the wheat is gathered into the barn and the chaff is burned up with fire. John the Baptist described the time when the Messiah comes. He will purify His people and preserve the remnants (wheat) for the kingdom of God. As for those who reject Him (chaff), they will be judged and be thrown into the unquenchable fire (Mal 4:1).²² The work of separation will certainly accompany the arrival of Christ. Men will either receive Him or reject Him. All who reject Jesus Christ will be separated out.

III. 3:13-17 The Holy Spirit and the Father testified together that Jesus is the Son of God at His baptism.

The baptism of Jesus was the climax as well as the conclusion of the work of John the Baptist. The Lord Jesus knew the mission that was entrusted to Him and He knew when and through which means His mission will be accomplished. As the Savior of sinners and in order to identify with sinners, He went to the Jordan River to receive the baptism of John the Baptist before officially beginning His public ministry. God the Father and the Holy Spirit testified together that He was

God's anointed Messiah. Receiving such a baptism revealed His humble and honorable attitude at the beginning of His mission.

3:13-14 – “Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’” Even though John the Baptist and Jesus were cousins (Luke 1:36), they might not have met yet before this event. Or perhaps John had seen Jesus but he does not know that He was the Messiah until God revealed it to him. John himself said, “I myself did not know Him” (John 1:31-34). When Jesus came to be baptized by John the Baptist, John recognized that the Lord Jesus does not need to receive his baptism for his was a baptism of repentance. As 3:6 says, it was very possible that those who came to be baptized by John had to first confess their sins. John recognized the moral and spiritual supremacy of Jesus when he saw Him, that there was no sin for Jesus to confess. Therefore, John the Baptist refused to baptize Jesus. What was more, he felt unworthy and asked that Jesus instead baptize him.

3:15 – “Jesus replied, ‘Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then John consented.” Many Christians do not understand why the sinless Jesus had to be baptized since baptism signified repentance and confession of sins. There are a few explanations for His actions:

1. It represented Jesus's identification with sinners.²⁵
2. It foretold His death. The Lord Jesus did not sin, but He had to drink the bitter cup and receive the baptism of the cross to bear our sins (Mark 10:38; Luke 12:50).
3. It signaled the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus Christ.
4. It was a ceremony of anointing to be sent out for ministry. During the time of the Old Testament, prophets, priests, and kings whom God called were all anointed by oil before they began the work of God (the oil represented the Holy Spirit). This signified that God had given them the Holy Spirit to empower them to do His work. Even though the Holy Spirit had already come upon Jesus since His birth (Luke 1:35), this baptism was the commissioning ceremony to anoint Him for public ministry. From that point on, signs and wonders followed Jesus.
5. Jesus Christ set an example for those of us who believe in Him: to publicly declare our faith through baptism, which unites us to His death and resurrected so as to begin a new life (Rom 6:3-4).

3:16-17 – “As soon as Jesus was baptized, He went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on Him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’” Three important events occurred after Jesus was baptized:

1. “Heaven was opened” (3:16a). Mark 1:10 records: “Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open...” Luke 3:21 also records that as Jesus was praying, heaven was opened. This testified to the fact that God had heard His prayer. It pleased God that Jesus made a statement of His obedience through baptism.
2. “And He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on Him” (3:16b). John the Baptist thus testified to seeing the Holy Spirit descending on the Lord Jesus, and he realized then that He was the Son of God. This was God's sign to him, that the man on whom the Holy Spirit came down and remained was the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit (John 1:32-34). Isaiah also prophesied that the Spirit of God will rest on the Messiah (Isa 11:1-2). Therefore, John the Baptist recognized that Jesus is the Christ sent by God.

3. “And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased’” (3:17). In addition to this event, God the Father also repeated the same words on the Mount of Transfiguration as is recorded in Matthew 17:5. This statement implies the deity of the Lord Jesus. God provided obvious evidence that proved that Jesus Christ was His beloved Son. Through this, He targeted any falsehood in arguments that question the deity of Jesus. One main reason that the Jews did not believe in Christ was because they could not accept that He is “God” nor did they believe that He is the Messiah who came from God. For this reason, throughout the life of Christ on earth, God testified to Jesus’s deity with many miraculous evidences, all to prove that He is the Son of God.²⁶ It is also worth noting the clear revelation of the Trinity in this passage: the Father’s voice, the Son’s (Jesus) baptism, and the descending of the Holy Spirit like a dove on Jesus.

D. Conclusion

The Messianic kingdom promised by God finally arrived. After thirty silent years in Nazareth, the time had come for the promised Messiah. As God prophesied through the Old Testament prophets, He will appear and accomplish the mission of God. God sent John the Baptist to be His forerunner, to make all things ready, to prepare His way, and to bring people to repent, forsake their sins and enter into the kingdom of God.

John the Baptist is indeed an example of every worker of God. He lived in the “wilderness” while drawing continually near to the Lord. This was the secret of his strength in the work of the Lord. John the Baptist exalted the Lord and regarded himself as nothing but a voice. He did not want others to focus their attention on him, but rather on the Lord Jesus whom the Father sent. When he spoke of the Lord Jesus, he said, “He must become greater; I must become less” (John 3:30). This is the right attitude that every worker of God should have in serving the Lord. If we desire to be a worker approved by the Lord and “make ready the people” for the Lord, John the Baptist is our example to follow.

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