# DIVING DEEPER DISCUSSION GUIDE

## TEXT SUMMARY

Today's text, Matt 3:1-12, introduces us to one of most intriguing characters in Scripture, John the Baptist. In a few deft strokes, Matthew introduces us to John's unusual presentation, his provocative message, and his meteoric rise in popularity.

## INTRODUCTION (OBSERVATION):

1. Matthew again links the story of Jesus to ancient expectations expressed in the Hebrew Scriptures. He shows how John's main message (v. 2) is a fulfillment of Isaiah (v. 3, cf. Isa 40:3). Go back to read Isaiah 40 to see Matthew's quote in its original context.
2. John's appearance and diet seem extremely odd to us, but his garment and diet were not unusual for that time; they were associated with the poor nomadic folk who lived in the desert. Yet he had unusually wide appeal. How does Matthew describe the width and breadth of John's popularity?
3. John uses two word-pictures to describe the threat of God's judgment on the disobedient and hypocritical. What devices (one weapon, one tool) does he use in these word pictures?

## DISCUSSION (INTERPRETATION):

1. Today, a character like John would evoke pity, perhaps, or disdain. But even though John came from the desert and delivered a provocative message, he gained an immediate hearing. What do you think motivated so many to come hear John and submit to his baptism of repentance? (Remember the mood of the times: Israel chafing under Roman rule, with messianic movements briefly flourishing before being crushed by Rome.) There are several possible answers; notice that John himself questioned the motives of some.
2. John was anything but tactful; he was a polarizing figure. Yet God had called him to "prepare the way of the Lord." How did God use John and his provocative message to prepare the way for Jesus and His message and ministry? (See 4:17, where Jesus takes up John's theme at the beginning of His ministry.)

## SO WHAT? (APPLICATION):

1. **John was enormously popular in his day.** Today we would call him an "influencer" because he commanded a great deal of public attention. Yet his influence didn't result in a great and lasting revival in Israel. Within a few years, he would be executed by the State, and many in the same crowd who thronged to hear John would cry for Jesus to be crucified.

    - How do you explain the fact that public opinion can be so loud and broad in support of religious figures, yet people's lives remain unchanged?

    - Was there ever a time in your life (perhaps now) when your faith was motivated mostly by a desire to join the crowd?

2. **John called for the nation to "repent."** Why? Because the "Kingdom of Heaven" was "at hand."

    - Repentance is more than feelings of regret; it is a turn-around: abandoning one course of action and taking another. Was there ever a time in your life (perhaps now) when your "repentance" proved to be nothing more than regret? What hindered you from making significant changes in your life?

    - The Kingdom of Heaven John spoke of is the same Kingdom Jesus would later tell His followers to ask God to bring to earth. It is not the kingdom of any human ideology, nor is it a political scheme or cultural movement. Many are confused on this point, conflating their favorite political or cultural agenda with God's Kingdom. We are not forbidden to have private opinions about politics or involve ourselves in cultural debates or social campaigns, but we must not confuse our private opinions with God's Kingdom.

      How can we distinguish between a righteous earthly cause and the Kingdom of God?