

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 3:7 - 3:12



### **Gospel of Matthew** - Steve Gregg

In Matthew 3:7-12, Steve Gregg discusses John the Baptist's role as the forerunner to prepare for the coming of Christ. The Sadducees and Pharisees had differing views, with the former collaborating with Roman oppressors and the latter resisting them. Gregg explains that the Jewish people and their religion faced a tremendous judgment, which came in the form of the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. He emphasizes the importance of repenting and putting faith in Christ as the way to enter the kingdom of God, regardless of one's genetic heritage.

### **Transcript**

Today we'll pick up our study in the Gospel of Matthew at chapter 3 and verse 7. In the first six verses of this chapter, we were introduced to John the Baptist, who was a forerunner to prepare the people of Israel for the coming and the appearance of Christ. John was actually a distant relative of Jesus. They were cousins of some sort, but they were not really close growing up, and they may not have known each other as adults until the time that is coming up here to be discussed in the chapter.

But John was a prophet, and he lived in the wilderness, and he preached that people should repent because the kingdom of heaven was at hand, and that they should prepare themselves to enter that kingdom. But he also found that there were some people coming and responding to his preaching at some level, whose sincerity he doubted, and he wasn't going to let them get away with their hypocrisy. And that is what we read of in verse 7. After telling us in verses 5 and 6 that all the people of Judea and Jerusalem were coming out to hear John preach and to be baptized by him, it says in verse 7, I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his threshing floor, and gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. Now, this is the only specimen of John's preaching that we receive from the Gospel of Matthew.

Luke actually gives us more information about John's preaching, giving us examples of individual people who asked John what they should do. Soldiers and tax collectors and others were asking what they should do in order to prepare for the kingdom of God, and he gave them instructions. But here we have simply his general rebuke, really, to the religious leaders that he saw in the crowd.

Now, we're told in verse 7 that these people he saw that sent him into this tirade were Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism. Now, the Pharisees and Sadducees were not at all a monolithic group. They were in fact opposed to each other.

They were two different religious denominations or religious parties in Israel. The Pharisees were very firm in their adherence to the Old Testament law and also to the traditional rules and regulations that the rabbis had formulated. The Sadducees didn't have as much respect for the law generally, at least for the Old Testament in general, and they also didn't believe in supernatural things like angels and spirits.

Therefore, they had a different theology than the Pharisees did. The Sadducees also tended to collaborate more with the Roman oppressors and the Pharisees did not, and this was a bone of contention between them as well. But both groups, though they were hostile toward each other, had their own share of guilt, of hypocrisy.

They pretended to be something they were not. They pretended to be very religious, but indeed they were in their private lives not very pious. They were not just.

Jesus said to the Pharisees in particular in Matthew chapter 23 and verse 23 that they were carefully observing many of the smaller matters of Israel's law, paying their tithes, for example, but he said they neglected the weightier matters of the law. They neglected justice and mercy and faithfulness. So, there were many ways in which these religious leaders were not following God's principles at all.

They were following external ceremonial religion, but they had not in their own lives conformed to the larger issues of justice and mercy and compassion and faithfulness. And these are the things that God really cares most about. Jesus called those things the weightier matters of the law.

And because of that, though these men were viewed as very holy and very religious by those who observed them outwardly, John knew, and so did Jesus, that these men were really hypocrites. They were not as God-loving and God-serving as they appeared to be. And so when he saw these men coming apparently to be baptized, now whether they really intended to be baptized we don't know.

Maybe they were just there to spy. It's hard to say. But he basically assumed they were there to be baptized.

He said that they were a brood of vipers. Now, of course, a brood means a litter, like a

litter of kittens or a litter of puppies. But vipers are poisonous snakes, deadly, venomous reptiles.

And that's what he said these people were. They were like a litter of snakes, a brood of vipers. And, of course, vipers kill.

Vipers are deadly and dangerous. And he's saying essentially that these people are snakes and they're deadly, spiritually deadly. The influence the Pharisees and the Sadducees had on the religious life of Israel was truly spiritually deadly.

And he saw them as wicked, unclean, poisonous, venomous people. And he said to them, who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Now, the wrath to come is a major theme of John's preaching, as we shall see in the verses that follow. The wrath to come.

Who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Notice John assumed that those who came to repent and to be baptized in him were doing so in order to escape a wrath, that is the wrath of God, that was imminent, that was coming. Well, if you would go back to the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, and the last chapter of that book, you'd find that there is a prediction of a judgment that God would bring upon Israel. But he says before that judgment comes, he would send a warning in the form of Elijah the prophet.

And he says in the last two verses of the Old Testament, Malachi chapter 4, verses 5 and 6, Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. Now, the great and dreadful day of the Lord refers to a time of wrath, of judgment from God coming on the people of Israel. But he said before that great judgment comes, before that wrath falls, he would send Elijah the prophet.

And he says, And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a curse. It can say, in some translations, strike the earth with a curse, but the word earth and land are the same in the Hebrew, and therefore some translations say earth, some say land. I believe it is the land, the land of Israel he's talking about.

The land of Israel would be struck with a curse if they did not turn at the preaching of Elijah. Now, we don't have time to go into all of the ramifications of this now, but we will another time. But Jesus said to his disciples twice that John the Baptist was Elijah who was to come.

And therefore we know that the prophecy of Malachi about the coming of Elijah was fulfilled in John. And it was said that John or Elijah would turn people back to God, turn their hearts around, turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and of the children to the fathers, would bring about a change of heart in the people of Israel. And if they did not change, he would strike the land with a curse.

Now, it is this curse, this judgment, this great and terrible day of the Lord that Malachi spoke of on Israel that John is referring to when he says the wrath to come. He says to the Pharisees and said, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Now, many Christians, and certainly many non-Christians as they read this, are not aware that a short time after the story of the Gospels is completed, after Jesus died and rose again and went back to heaven, within 40 years there was a tremendous judgment that came upon Israel. It was the absolute destruction of the nation of Israel and of the Jewish religion.

We're talking about the coming of the Romans under the general Titus who came and they made war against Israel in 66 AD. And that war continued for about three and a half years. And late in 70 AD, the city of Jerusalem had been besieged for a while and it was penetrated by the Roman forces and demolished.

The Jews were slaughtered in great numbers after a great and horrible siege. And the temple was destroyed and the walls of Jerusalem were torn down and the Jews were banished from Jerusalem and scattered throughout all the world. This was the end of the Jewish state.

It was the end of the Jewish commonwealth and it was the end of the Jewish religion because the temple was destroyed. Now you might say, but there's still Jewish religion today. Well, there is something that calls itself Jewish religion, but it's not biblical Jewish.

Judaism is over. Judaism came to an end when the temple was destroyed because Judaism, as described in the Old Testament, in the law, was a religion of animal sacrifice, which were offered by a priesthood of Levites who offered these sacrifices in a temple or a tabernacle first and then a temple. None of these things have been going on since 70 AD.

All these practices, there have been no animal sacrifices in Israel, there's no temple, there's no priesthood. Judaism, as defined in Scripture, has not existed since the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. So this was a tremendous judgment on the Jewish people and on their religion, on their nation in 70 AD.

That happened within a generation of John's preaching. Now it was within view, even as he preached, that was going to be the great and dreadful day of the Lord. God was going to bring a horrible wrath upon this people if they did not turn around.

But before bringing the wrath, he was sending Elijah. Or in this case, he sent someone in the spirit and power of Elijah. And that was John the Baptist.

And he was to turn these people around. He was to announce that the wrath was imminent and that they had to turn or else they would burn. Really, turn or burn was very much John's message.

And so when he saw these hypocrites, he said, who has warned you to flee from this wrath that's coming? He says in verse 8, therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance. What he means by this is that he's only there to baptize those who had a repentant heart. He's not there just to baptize people who have other motives.

Those who really wanted to repent and get right with God were worthy to be baptized. But repentance is not invisible. It may begin in the heart, but it shows up in behavior.

And he says, I want to see fruits or evidence in your life that you have repented. What he was essentially saying is I will not baptize you because I don't believe you've really repented. And I won't change my mind unless I see evidence of repentance.

I want to see the fruits of repentance in your life. And he says in verse 9, and do not think to say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father, meaning ancestor. We're descended from Abraham.

For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. Now, of course, the Jews many times thought that they were God's special people and God's special pets, as it were, somehow immune from God's wrath, whereas all other nations were despised by God. But they believed that they were immune because they were descended from Abraham.

That's who the Jews were. They were the offspring of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. And to a large extent, the Jews began to interpret their specialness and their relationship with God in terms of their genetic heritage.

They began to feel that if they were descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that put them automatically in the class of those that were favored by God. Now, it is true that God had made certain promises to Abraham and to his seed. But that was greatly misunderstood by the Jews.

They figured that if they were descended from Abraham, then they were Abraham's seed, and therefore they were automatically to be blessed. Now, the apostle Paul later put some perspective on this promise. In Galatians chapter 3 and verse 16, Paul pointed out that it's not to the multiple seeds of Abraham, but to the individual seed of Abraham that these promises apply.

And Paul said that the seed of Abraham to whom the promises apply is Christ. It's not the Jewish people as a whole or as a group who are the seed of Abraham to whom the promises are made. It is the ultimate seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ, to whom the promises apply.

And the only way to be a member of that Abrahamic family is to be in Christ, which, of course, is done by becoming a Christian. When you repent of your sin, put your faith in Christ as your Lord and your Savior, and you embark on a life of following Him, you have

come into the kingdom of God. You have become part of the body of Christ.

You are in Christ, and He is the seed, and therefore the promises that applied to Abraham and his seed apply to you. This, Paul said at the end of Galatians 3, when he said, If you are Christ's, that means if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and you are the heirs according to the promise. So, Christians who are in Christ are Abraham's seed, in a sense that Jews who do not believe in Christ are not.

Now, the Jews understood it simply biologically. If they are biologically related to Abraham, they are Abraham's seed, and therefore they're okay with God. But Paul put it another way in Romans chapter 2, and in verses 28 and 29.

In that place, Romans chapter 2, verses 28 and 29, the Apostle Paul wrote, He is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh, but he is a Jew who is one inwardly. And circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter, whose praise is not from men, but from God. So, Paul tells us that being born Jewish doesn't make you a Jew, as far as God is concerned, in any sense that matters.

And he tells us that if a person is in Christ, whether they're Jewish or Gentile, they are now Abraham's seed, and the ones to whom the promises apply. Now, John the Baptist apparently had some inkling about this too, because he said to them, Don't boast in the fact that you're descended from Abraham. Don't say, We have Abraham as our father.

He says, God, if He wished to, could raise up children to Abraham from these stones. In other words, children of Abraham, in the sense that the Jews were children of Abraham, is nothing to be impressed with. God could replace them with persons raised up from stone.

Now, what's interesting is that John said God could produce children of Abraham from the stones. Now, we all know, of course, that God can do whatever He wants to. He made the first man from dust.

He could make a man from stone if He wants to. But what's interesting is that if God would take a stone and turn it into a man, that would be a man, but it would not be a child of Abraham in the literal sense. Because in order to be a descendant of Abraham, you have to have a history going back to Abraham.

You have to have come out of a woman whose husband was descended from Abraham, and so forth. And if God turns stones into people, He can call them children of Abraham, but they would not be literally children of Abraham. Because to be someone's child, you must have come out of them biologically.

But a stone can't be made into something that has that history, because once you turn a stone into a man, the history of that man is that he was a stone, not that he came from Abraham. So what's interesting about John's statement is that the term children of

Abraham can be applied legitimately even to persons who never were descended from Abraham. If God would make men from stones, He could make them children of Abraham if He wished.

Not in the literal sense of having been physically descended, but in the sense that He means that the promises belong to Abraham. Any person, a Gentile who no more came physically from Abraham than a stone came from Abraham, yet can be a child of Abraham in the sense that matters, in the sense that the promises apply to him. And that's what John the Baptist is saying, that just because you're physically a Jew doesn't entitle you to any special privilege with God.

Of course, that was not a welcomed statement, and the Jews probably were very upset with him for saying that, because it went right against the grain of their whole thinking. But John the Baptist, and later Jesus, had exactly the same message about that. Jesus was speaking to the Jews in John chapter 8, and He said, I know that you are Abraham's seed.

But He said, if you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham. And what He means is He acknowledges that they physically descended from Abraham, but they were not Abraham's children in the sense that matters, because to be one of Abraham's children, in any meaningful sense, you would have to be doing the works of Abraham. That's what Jesus said, and He said to the same people He was talking to in John 8, 44, You are of your father the devil.

So, they were spiritually descended from the devil, not spiritually descended from Abraham. A person who is a spiritual seed of Abraham is one who does the works of Abraham, and has the faith of Abraham. And, of course, Paul has told us in Galatians 3 that those persons are the ones who have become followers of Christ.

So, Christians are the seed of Abraham, and heirs according to the promise, according to Paul's statement in Galatians chapter 3 at the end of that chapter. Well, that seems to be hinted at by John's own statement, that God could raise up of the stones children to Abraham. And then He says this in verse 10, Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees.

Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

His winnowing fan is also in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his threshing floor, and gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. Now, John gives three examples in a row of something that is happening at that time. He says this is happening right now.

He says, Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Now, what John says in all three of these verses, verses 10, 11, and 12 in Matthew chapter 3, is that God is making a separation in Israel. There is in Israel, in John's day, a remnant who were true believers.

And there was, of course, the rest of Israel who were no more Jewish in heart than the Gentiles were. They simply had Jewish blood in their veins, but they didn't have a heart for God, and therefore they were like fruitless trees or like chaff. But within Israel there was another category.

They were the faithful. They were like the trees that had fruit on them. They were like the wheat, not the chaff.

And John says that at this present time, meaning the time he was preaching, God was going through Israel and making a division. He had an axe in his hand, and he's looking at each tree, and the trees that have no fruit he's going to cut down and throw in the fire. That would be a reference, of course, to the Jews who did not receive Christ.

They did not bear fruit. They were not part of the faithful remnant. They would have to face fire, and that fire, no doubt, was the judgment they faced in 70 A.D. Likewise, he made another comparison.

It's like separating wheat and chaff on the threshing floor. His fan is in his hand now. He's about ready to make the separation between the wheat and the chaff.

The wheat he'll gather into his barn, but the chaff he's going to burn with unquenchable fire. So, again, the same idea. A separation is being made in Israel.

The faithful remnant will be preserved. Those who are not part of the faithful remnant are going to be exposed to the fire of God's judgment. Now, between those two illustrations, there's this statement about, the one who's coming after me is greater than I. I'm not even worthy to bear his sandals.

In other words, I'm not even worthy to be his servant. But he says, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. Now, just as the other two illustrations make a division, there are some who are like trees with fruit.

There are some who are like trees without fruit. There are some that are like wheat. There are some that are like chaff.

So, there are some that will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. There are others who will be baptized with fire, which, of course, is the judgment that was coming on those that would reject Christ. When Jesus came, he called the remnant to himself, and the remnant of Israel became his disciples.



When the judgment came in 70 A.D., his church escaped it. The Christians in Jerusalem fled from Jerusalem, and they did not succumb to that judgment. And so, John was essentially saying that there is a separation being made in Israel.

Those who follow the Messiah will be preserved. Those who reject the Messiah will be facing the fire of God's judgment, like chaff or like fruitless trees. And that is essentially what John's message was as represented here.

Well, next time we'll see how Jesus actually came and was baptized by John. This surprised John, and it surprises us. And we'll talk about the meaning of that and the reason for it next time.

However, we've run out of time for this session, so I hope you'll join us again next time as we study the Gospel of Matthew together.