

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 3:1 - 3:6



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

In this discussion, Steve Gregg examines Matthew chapter 3 and its account of John the Baptist's ministry prior to Jesus' public ministry. Gregg notes that John's call to repentance and preparation of hearts for the Messiah's coming was predicted in Old Testament prophecy. He also highlights the use of the term "kingdom heaven" in Matthew's gospel, explaining that it refers to the rule of God rather than a specific geographic location. Overall, Gregg provides insight into the historical context and significance of Matthew's account of Jesus' early ministry.

### **Transcript**

Today, let's turn to Matthew chapter 3, and we will continue our study in the life of Christ according to Matthew's account. In the first two chapters, we had what we would call birth narratives, birth stories of Jesus. Most of the Gospels, well, I shouldn't say most, two of the Gospels, of the four, do not even contain any stories about Jesus' birth or childhood.

Only Matthew and Luke do, and even they give only very limited information. And what Matthew has told us is that after the birth of Jesus, he was visited by wise men from the east, and he almost, well, he would have been killed had not he been spared by escaping to Egypt, because Herod sought to kill him. And then he came back from Egypt and settled with his family.

This would still be while Jesus was quite young, probably still a toddler. They settled in Nazareth, which was a community in Galilee. Perhaps I should say something about Israel's geography at this point, because as we go through the Gospels, we need to be aware of how the nation of Israel was laid out.

Israel is really quite a small country, and it was long and narrow. North to south was the greater distance, and east to west was a very short distance. But it was a long, narrow country.

It still is, by the way. And in the southern region of Israel was a province called Judea, which in earlier times had been called Judah, because the tribe of Judah had principally

dominated it in Old Testament times. And the capital of the country was there.

Jerusalem was in Judah, or Judea. In the northern end of the country was another province called Galilee. This is where Jesus grew up, and this is also where much of his public ministry was conducted.

Galilee was actually populated by more Gentiles than Jews, although it was technically part of Israel. It was sometimes called Galilee of the Gentiles, because, as I say, there were more Gentiles than Jews there. But it was part of the Jews' territory, and it was part of the region that had, in Old Testament times, been part of the northern kingdom of Israel.

Now, between Galilee in the north and Judea in the south lay a region that was called Samaria. And Samaria was sort of a buffer between Galilee and Judea, but it was a place where the inhabitants of Judea and Galilee had no respect for these people. The Samaritans were the descendants of Jewish people who had intermarried with Gentile people.

And so the Samaritans, many generations later, in Jesus' day, had become sort of a mongrel, half-breed race as far as the Jews were concerned. And they also had mongrelized their religious practices, so that the Samaritans were not really purely Jewish in their religion either. And because of this half-breed sort of status of the Samaritans, many of the Jews looked down on them considerably and wouldn't even want to go into Samaria.

In fact, some Jews felt that if the wind blew through Samaria and then blew on them, that they would be defiled by that wind. Of course, this was nothing that the Bible encouraged. This was simply bigotry on the part of the Jews.

Anyway, this is how the country was laid out. You have Judea in the south, Samaria in the middle, and then Galilee in the north. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, which was in the south, in Judea, near Jerusalem.

He had spent time in Egypt as an infant, but when Herod had died, Joseph and Mary moved back to Galilee, which is really where they had originated, and to the town of Nazareth, where Joseph had been, and apparently continued to be, a carpenter. After this point, we don't read very much about Jesus' childhood. Matthew gives us nothing beyond this, although Luke, very briefly in chapter 2 of Luke, tells us of a story that occurred when Jesus was 12, how that he was misplaced, as it were, by his parents in Jerusalem, and they found him talking to the teachers in the temple and amazing them with his wisdom.

But apart from that story, which occurred when Jesus was 12, the Bible really tells us almost nothing of Jesus' later childhood, or even young manhood. When Matthew begins

chapter 3, Jesus is now an adult. He's about 30 years old.

Now, Matthew doesn't tell us that, but the same story is related in Luke chapter 3, and in Luke chapter 3, we're told that Jesus was about 30 at this time. So, Matthew has skipped over almost 30 years of Jesus' life. Luke, who, of course, tells us one incident from Jesus' youth when he was 12, skips over 18 years.

And there was, therefore, a large block of time in Jesus' lifetime on earth, about which we know almost nothing. Now, we do know that the people of Nazareth, at a later time when Jesus came preaching there, recognized him as the carpenter and the carpenter's son. So, they apparently had known him when he was growing up to be Joseph's son, working in a carpenter shop.

There are a few other things we can deduce about his youth, but they apparently were not important enough things for the gospel writers to include them. They were apparently not part of the necessary message of what Jesus came to do. So, we find that the gospel writers are very unconventional in their biographical enterprise.

They do not do what most biographers would do. They do not give a seamless or continuous narrative of the life of the man they're talking about, but they skip over large blocks of time. And the reason is, they're not trying to write an ordinary biography.

They're trying to write a gospel, that is, a presentation of the good news of salvation. And the majority of the things that Jesus did during those youthful years apparently are not directly relevant to this message of the gospel. When they do get around to talking about the gospel, they usually start by talking about John the Baptist.

All four of the gospels give some record of John the Baptist's ministry before they give any record of Jesus' ministry. John the Baptist was a forerunner to the Messiah. And we get, not here in Matthew, but over in Luke chapter 1, we get details of how he was born.

John the Baptist was also born somewhat miraculously, not of a virgin, as Jesus was, but of an old woman who was past childbearing age, a little bit like Isaac had been born to Abraham and Sarah when Sarah was too old to have children. So John the Baptist's mother had been too old to have children, and she miraculously conceived and brought forth this man who was to be the greatest of the prophets, and the one who would address Israel, call them to repentance, and introduce them to the Messiah, who was, of course, Jesus. Now, John the Baptist is a very important figure in the gospel records, and he is the prophet that was predicted in a couple of Old Testament places.

In Isaiah chapter 40, there is a reference to the voice of one crying in the wilderness. This is a reference to John the Baptist, as Matthew will point out to us. There is another prophet in the Old Testament, Malachi, who in chapter 3 and verse 1 prophesied that God would send a messenger ahead of the Messiah, and that, of course, is John the

Baptist also.

And John was an unusual man. We get something, a little bit of detail about his life here. But John was approximately 30 years old, and so was Jesus, when the events of Matthew chapter 3 transpired.

And this is the beginning, really, of Jesus' public ministry. Though he was, at this point, 30 years old, he had done no public ministry prior to this. And so, when we come to Matthew chapter 3, we're introduced to the ministry of John the Baptist as sort of a springboard into the ministry of Jesus as an adult.

We read, For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. And John himself was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan went out to him, and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.

Now, let's stop there a moment. That gives us a good sampling of what John the Baptist's impact was. You know, it's rather interesting that we have a very good confirmation of John's ministry from a secular source of the time, and that is Josephus.

Josephus was a Jewish historian. He was not a Christian. He was not acquainted with the gospel writings.

But he lived in the first century. He was a contemporary with the apostles, but he probably never met them. But he was commissioned by the emperor to write the history of the Jews, and he wrote very, very voluminous histories.

And in one passage, in one of his histories, he points out that John the Baptist came and was baptizing people. And there's really only a paragraph about John there in Josephus' work, about as long as this paragraph we just read in the Gospels. But it's interesting how much it corresponds with and confirms what the Gospels say, although it is in no sense dependent upon them.

So we have external confirmation from a Jewish historian that John the Baptist was a real character, and that he did essentially these things. Now, we're told he was preaching in the wilderness of Judea. According to Luke chapter 2, when John the Baptist reached a certain age, we don't know at what age, probably 12 or 13, he left home and he went to live in the wilderness.

And he ate only such food as could be found there in the wilderness, wild honey and locusts. Now, some people have tried to make locusts out to be some kind of a plant, like maybe wild carob or something like that. But there's no reason to make it that.

He ate locusts, grasshoppers. In the Jewish law, in Leviticus chapter 16, you'll find a list

of the animals that Jews were not permitted to eat. And most kinds of animals were unclean and not permitted to the Jews to eat.

But there were some that were clean, and that includes some insects. Almost all insects were unclean to the Jews, but there was an exception. And that was any insect whose hind legs extended above the body of the insect was clean.

And that would mean hopping insects, like locusts and grasshoppers and crickets, were actually animals that could be eaten by the Jews. And so there's no reason to believe that when it says that John ate locusts and wild honey, that that means anything other than what we think of as locusts. He needed to get protein somewhere.

And so he just ate wild food as he could find it out there in the wilderness. He was kind of a hermit type of a prophet out there in the wilderness. And his message is found in verse 2, summarized.

He said, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Now, the term kingdom of heaven that we find here for the first time in Matthew is a term that is found only in Matthew's accounts. It is used as an equivalent of the term kingdom of God.

Kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God are simply interchangeable terms. Matthew apparently uses this term because he writes to Jewish readers who were somewhat oversensitive about the use of the word God. It's not as if they would never use it, but they were cautious about using it too frequently or too lightly.

They did not want to inadvertently become blasphemers or take the name of the Lord in vain. So many times where we would say God, they would simply put in the word heaven. The prodigal son said, Father, I've sinned against heaven and in your sight.

He meant I've sinned against God. And so also where the term kingdom of God was frequently used in the Gospels, on many occasions Matthew renders it kingdom of heaven, substituting the word heaven for God. Now, this difference in wording should not throw us off.

The kingdom of heaven is just another term for the kingdom of God. And we can see this, for example, by comparing these statements in Matthew with parallel statements in the other Gospels. Only Matthew uses the term kingdom of heaven.

But where you find parallel statements between those recorded in Matthew and those recorded in the other Gospels, where Matthew uses the term kingdom of heaven, the other Gospels substitute the term kingdom of God. And therefore we know that Matthew is simply using a different term to render the same statement. And in fact, we know that kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God are used even interchangeably in Matthew's own Gospel.

Because in Matthew chapter 19, Jesus is quoted by Matthew as speaking on the occasion when the rich young ruler went away sorrowful, not willing to meet the demands of discipleship. Jesus said this in Matthew 19, verses 23 and 24. Then Jesus said to his disciples, Assuredly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Now notice Jesus said the same thing twice. Basically, it's hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom.

But in one verse, this is Matthew 19, 23, he calls it the kingdom of heaven. In the very next verse, making the same statement, repeating himself, he calls it the kingdom of God. So the terms are interchangeable.

The reason I bring that up is because Matthew tells us, in Matthew 3, 2, that John came preaching, repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. In Mark's Gospel, we do not read of John's message this way, but we read of Jesus later preaching the same message. In Mark chapter 1, in verses 14 and 15, it says, Jesus came, saying, the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand.

Repent, therefore, and believe the gospel. So Jesus said, the kingdom of God is at hand, therefore repent. John said, repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Kingdom of God, kingdom of heaven, these are interchangeable. What's being referred to here is that which the prophets anticipated, the kingdom that God would establish among his people, over which the Messiah himself would be the king. Now, we should understand the word kingdom simply means the domain of a king.

It means, in fact, kingdom is the king's domain. And the domain of a king is made up of his subjects. A kingdom is not necessarily restricted to a geographical area.

Wherever the subjects of a king are, there is his kingdom. And to speak of the kingdom of God means God was going to establish, and he predicted this in the prophets of the Old Testament, a domain on earth under his Messiah, who would rule as king. And those who were subject to the Messiah, those who received him as their king and their lord, would be his subjects.

And they would have all the benefits of being subject to God's own king, and having God as a king. You know, Israel as a whole nation originally had God as their king. When they came out of Egypt, God said to them in Exodus 19, verses 5 and 6, If you will obey my voice indeed, and if you'll keep my covenant, then you'll be a peculiar people to me, for all the earth is mine.

He said, and you'll be a kingdom of priests. That is, God told Israel that they would be a kingdom unto him of priests. So, the people of Israel could have been his kingdom.

But in 1 Samuel, chapter 8, the rulers of Israel came to Samuel and said, Give us a king to rule over us, as all the nations have. And this thing displeased Samuel and God, because God said, They have not rejected you, Samuel, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them. So Israel, which was given the supreme and unique privilege of having God as their king, actually chose to have an earthly king like all the other nations had.

And this was a great disappointment. This was a rejection of God's kingship over them. However, in later prophets, God told the Israelites that he would again establish his kingdom.

And he would again rule over his people. But this kingdom would be established not with the whole nation of Israel, but with the remnant who were faithful to him. And now John the Baptist comes announcing that this fulfillment of this promise was at hand.

That means near. It would happen soon. Jesus preached the same message.

The kingdom of God is at hand. What this means is that God was about to establish the kingdom of his son among the remnant of Israel. And this was the time for that to happen.

Of course, inherent in that promise was that the Messiah was coming, since the Messiah would have to be there to reign over his kingdom. So the announcement that the kingdom was at hand was another way of saying the Messiah himself is at hand, and the kingdom that he will reign over is about to be established. Now, in Matthew 3.3, Matthew tells us, this is he, John the Baptist, is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.

Now, this is found in Isaiah chapter 40, this prophecy. And the wilderness in Isaiah is a symbol sometimes for the spiritual state of the nation of Israel. And Israel, before John the Baptist came, wasn't a spiritual wilderness.

They were not producing fruit like a garden or like a vineyard would. They were more like a wilderness, untended, unfruitful, essentially worthless to God. But he was going to change that.

According to many of the passages in Isaiah, the desert or the wilderness would blossom and bud and fill the earth with its fruit, which was a way of saying that God was going to bring spiritual fruit from Israel again, even though it had become a spiritual wilderness. And so Isaiah the prophet said that God would send someone, a prophetic voice, in this wilderness of Israel, and he would say, Hey, it's time to get ready for the Lord to come, for the Messiah to come. And according to Matthew, John the Baptist is that voice in the wilderness.

And John actually lived in the literal wilderness, perhaps to illustrate the point. And he was predicting that the Messiah was going to come and establish the kingdom of God, as so many times had been promised in the Old Testament. Now, we have this brief description of the man, John, himself.

He was clothed in camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist. Now, camel's hair is not a reference to a camel's hide or skin. It was not leather that he wore.

Camel's hair was a cloth woven from camel's hair, just like wool is woven from the hair of a sheep. So the poorer people in Israel sometimes wore camel's hair. It was not as comfortable as other cloths, but it was cheap.

And it was sort of the garment of the poor man. It was a little bit like wearing sackcloth, which when the Israelites were repenting of some great sin, they often put on sackcloth, which was a rough garment that was uncomfortable in order to show their sincerity and sorrow over their sin. John wore something like a sackcloth garment of camel's hair, which was, of course, an emblem of repentance, the very thing that he was calling people to.

He also wore a leather belt, which isn't too strange in our time for people to wear. But in those days, people wore cloth sashes around their waist, not leather. But Elijah the prophet had worn a leather belt, according to 2 Kings chapter 1. And therefore, John was somewhat mimicking the dress of Elijah the prophet.

Later, we will find that John was sort of the fulfillment of the prophecy about Elijah to come. And we read of his wilderness lifestyle here, how he ate locusts and wild honey. And the people of Jerusalem all came to him to be baptized by him and confess their sins.

So sort of a revival took place under John's preaching. The people got wind of the fact that there was a man out there preaching. Now, who he preached to first, I don't know.

Perhaps he just waited for travelers to go by on the wilderness road and started screaming out to them that they should repent. And these people, when they got into town, said, Hey, there's some madman out there preaching in the wilderness. It's hard to know how quickly his fame spread.

But it did. And eventually, he was a household word. Everyone knew who John the Baptist was.

Even the religious leaders had to send spies out to investigate and see what this guy was up to because he was having a tremendous impact on the religious life of Israel. And he was not one of them. He was not one of the Pharisees.

He was obviously there with a rival movement to announce. And that rival movement, of



course, became the movement of Jesus. But that's getting ahead of ourselves.

We're just about out of time today for our study in the Gospel of Matthew. What we can see is that before Jesus came, God wanted to prepare the hearts of the people to begin to think about their needs, to begin to recognize their sin, to call them to repentance. And he calls us to repentance today, too.

If we have sinned, we cannot be right with God without repenting of our sin and turning to him and then receiving the Messiah, as John the Baptist eventually pointed Jesus out as the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world and told his disciples to follow him. Well, we'll read about that. But we're going to have to take a break at this point because we've run out of time for this session.

So next time, we'll resume our studies in this Gospel.