

## Matthew 3A

- Tonight, we move into Chapter 3 of Matthew
  - And as we do, we find Matthew leaving Jesus' childhood so he can tell the story of how Jesus entered into ministry
    - It's always fascinated Bible students that the Bible gives us relatively little detail about Jesus' early life
    - Only Luke records details between the birth and the start of Jesus' ministry
    - And even then, Luke only gives a single story of Jesus left behind in the temple by His parents
  - We can assume some things that are likely to be accurate, based on our understanding of ancient Jewish life and customs
    - For example, at age 13, Jesus would have experienced His Bar Mitzvah, the Jewish rite recognizing a boy's transition to manhood
    - Luke's story of Jesus' trip to the temple for the Passover at age 12 was probably preparation for his Bar Mitzvah
  - Later, at age 17, Jesus was probably made an apprentice to his earthly father in his trade of carpentry
    - Carpentry in that day meant working in stone as a stone cutter, as well as with wood
    - So Jesus would have been learning how to work with His hands under the instruction of Joseph
  - But Jesus would have also been apprenticing under His Heavenly Father's instruction, preparing for His profession in ministry
    - Jesus being fully God and not descended from Adam, He had a perfect sinless life
    - But being fully human as well, Jesus had to learn as we all do
    - He would have had the Holy Spirit as His teacher, as do we

- And so it required years of time for Him to be prepared to fulfill His purpose in ministry
- But then, there came that point when the Father was ready for His Son to reveal Himself to the world and to begin His ministry
  - At that point, Jesus was going to speak and act in ways to demonstrate His deity
    - He would teach with great authority and insight
    - He would perform supernatural miracles
    - And He would have perfect understanding of God's heart, while understanding the inner thoughts of His enemies
  - But human beings can't do these things
    - And because Jesus took the form of man, He too lacked the power to do these things on His own initiative
    - Jesus required the Father to enable Him in these things
    - To equip Jesus by the Spirit for ministry
    - That's one of the things we're going to look at as we study this chapter
  - But now in Chapter 3, we jump forward about 30 years to the moment Jesus enters into His ministry
    - And that story begins with the account of another man, called John, the son of Zacharias
    - Otherwise known as John the Baptist

**Matt. 3:1** Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying,

**Matt. 3:2** "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

**Matt. 3:3** For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said,  
 "The voice of one crying in the wilderness,  
 'Make ready the way of the Lord,  
 Make His paths straight!'"

**Matt. 3:4** Now John himself had a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.

[Matt. 3:5](#) Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan;

[Matt. 3:6](#) and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins.

- John the Baptist was a cousin, once-removed, to Jesus
  - John's mother, Elizabeth, and Jesus' mother, Mary, were first cousins
    - Both mothers knew they were bearing special sons
    - Men who would serve God in significant ways
  - John was born about 6 months before Jesus
    - So we can assume both John and Jesus knew each other and probably played together as children, at least occasionally
    - But we also know that at some point, their lives diverged
  - John and Jesus lived in separate parts of the country and their families had very different ways of life
    - Jesus' earthly father was a manual laborer in the Galilee
    - While John's father was a priest serving in the temple in Jerusalem twice a year
    - So the two sons likely saw less and less of each other as they grew older
  - More importantly, John did not grow up knowing that his cousin, Jesus, was the future Messiah
    - In fact, no one outside Mary and Joseph knew the full story about Jesus
    - After Joseph was gone, only Mary would have known this truth
    - So Jesus grew up in obscurity, as did John
  - You may remember the account in John's Gospel where Jesus and Mary attend the wedding in Cana
    - Mary asks Jesus to perform a miracle, to which Jesus rebukes His mother for asking Jesus to reveal Himself prematurely

- The key point from that story is that Jesus came to earth with a specific mission
- And His mission ran according to a timetable set by the Father
- So until the Father was ready to reveal His Son, no one thought Jesus to be anyone other than a carpenter's son in Galilee
- But then, the time came for Jesus to be unveiled to the world as the long-promised Messiah
  - At that time, Jesus was about 30 years old, according to the Gospel of John
    - And Matthew says "in those days" John began preaching in the wilderness of Judea
    - Judea is Judah's tribal territory of southern Israel that extends from the Mediterranean Sea on the west to the Jordan river in the east
    - And from just north of Jerusalem to the Negev desert in the south
  - In the middle of Judah, there is a mountain range that runs north-south
    - The prevailing winds blow from the west off the Mediterranean Sea, bringing moisture into Israel
    - As those winds collide with the mountains, the air cools and releases its moisture on the western foothills
    - Then the air passes over the mountains as a hot, dry wind creating a vast desert wasteland on the leeward side of the mountain down to the Jordan river
    - That desert is called the Judean Wilderness
  - At some point during his 20s, John left his home and retreated into this harsh desert region
    - John spent most of his time in the lower Jordan river valley, north of the Dead Sea and northeast of Jerusalem
    - He survives off the land, as Matthew tells us in v.4, dressed as a prophet in mourning and having minimal contact with people

- To this remote location, people were walking great distances from Jerusalem and all Judea to hear John's message
  - As they heard him preaching, they began to confess their sins
  - And then they entered into the Jordan river with John, and they allowed him to baptize them
- Somewhere during his time in the wilderness, Luke says the Lord spoke to John to give him his ministry of baptism, from which he gets his name
  - The word "baptism" comes from a Greek word that means, "to dip" or "sink into water"
    - Jews were well-acquainted with baptism
    - Jewish practices found in both the Law and in tradition made frequent use of ceremonial washings
    - Some washings involved little more than hand washing, while others called for the entire body to be submerged in water
    - Some of these ceremonial cleansings required "living water" which is the Jewish term for water that is flowing or moving
  - Practically speaking, this explains why John ministered in the desert wilderness by the Jordan river
    - The Jordan was the main source of moving water suitable for whole body immersion near Jerusalem
    - There were also spring-fed pools and baths in Jerusalem and other cities and towns where baptisms took place
    - But these pools were under the control of Jewish authorities who were opposed to John's message and ministry (as we'll see)
  - Jewish baptisms didn't have the same spiritual emphasis that our Christian baptism has today
    - Generally, they were part of the Law or rabbinical teaching that grew out of the Law
    - They were associated with a concept in scripture called ritual cleanliness
  - The idea was that sin has made us spiritually "dirty" and we needed cleansing before God

- Obviously, we can't wash away our sin with water
- But God gave Israel these physical washing rituals to help them understand their need for spiritual cleansing, which comes from God
- And so Israel practiced these washings regularly as a constant reminder of their need for God to wash them clean
- A Jew was required to wash at various times, usually by full-body immersion, to remove ritual uncleanliness
  - The Law itself requires such washings in connection with various feasts or specific situations in Jewish life
    - The rabbis had also added other requirements for washings including for those who were converting to Judaism
  - But John's baptism was neither a baptism of conversion to Judaism nor was it a baptism for ritual uncleanliness
    - In other words, John was using water immersion in a completely new way, unrelated to any requirement found in the Law or rabbinical teaching
    - John's baptism was something new, something the Lord gave him, a baptism connected to a new message
  - The Bible tells us John was preaching a three-part message
    - Matthew gives us two of those parts, while Luke gives us the third part
    - The first part of his message was a call to action
    - The second part of his message gave cause to act
    - And the third part of his message required a promise
- The first part of John's message, his call to action, was a single, powerful word: Repent
  - Repent, or repentance, is a word Christians hear often, but for all its familiarity, it's not well understood
    - It doesn't mean to feel sorry or to regret having done something wrong

- It literally means a change or a turn in our thinking
- You could say to repent is to change your mind
- Specifically, repenting means to change your mind about your sin
  - Where before we gave no thought to our sin or of God's perspective on our sin
  - But now, we have repented – changed our thinking on the subject – and we have become greatly concerned over our sin
  - Even more, we are deeply troubled by what God thinks of our sin, and so we have turned to direct our attention toward Him
- That's what the Bible means when it calls people to repent
  - It's asking us to face the reality of who we are and Who God is
  - We must recognize we are sinners, people who have disobeyed God's commands, and therefore we have offended Him
  - Knowing we have offended God, we should be concerned for what will become of us at the moment we face Him for judgment
- While the concept of repentance was not new to Israel, John was applying it in a powerful new way
  - John was calling God's people to get right with God
  - Because despite the Jews' external piety and religious devotion, in reality, they were largely a Godless people
  - So John calls Israel to collectively change their minds about their comfortable co-existence with sin
  - And to turn their thoughts toward considering how God might judge them
- Secondly, John's message gave the people cause to act in repentance, because John declared that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand
  - A Jew of John's day would have understood what John meant by the Kingdom of God, but we probably need a minute or two of explanation
    - The Old Testament prophets told Israel that the Lord would one day set up a new Kingdom on the earth

- This Kingdom would rule the entire earth and all nations would be under the authority of the King of this Kingdom
- The Kingdom would be centered in Israel and the Jewish people would be the chief nation among all nations
- And the Jewish Messiah would be the ruler of this Kingdom
- The Lord promised this Kingdom at various points in the Old Testament, including in His covenants to the patriarchs and to David and Solomon
  - And for centuries, the Jewish people had heard the Jewish prophets reminding them it was coming
  - The last of those prophets was Malachi
  - But Malachi died 400 years earlier, and since then, the Lord hadn't spoken a word to Israel about the Kingdom
  - So for many within Israel, the promise of a coming Messianic Kingdom seemed more and more unlikely
  - Many had stopped expecting it and even fewer were prepared for it
- But now, a new prophet had emerged in the wilderness, a man declaring once again that the Kingdom of God was coming
  - More than that, this prophet was saying the Kingdom was actually *at hand*
  - When we say something is "at hand" we mean it's on the verge of appearing, it's imminent
  - Like when we see a woman nearing the end of her ninth month of pregnancy, we might say the birth of her child is at hand
- This was intended to be motivation for these people to heed John's call to repent
  - The prophets foretold that the arrival of the Kingdom of God would coincide with the resurrection of God's people and a judgment to follow
  - We see this clearly in the book of Daniel

**Dan. 12:1** "Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise. And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred

since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued.

[Dan. 12:2](#) “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt.

- Daniel was told that at the end of this age, following a time of great distress on the earth, the Kingdom would appear
  - At that time, God’s elect would be rescued
  - They would “awake” from the dust of the ground, meaning they would be resurrected
  - And then a judgment would follow, with some being welcomed into the Kingdom and others being excluded
- So when a new prophet declared that this kingdom was about to appear, Israel had good reason to care
  - They felt the same way employees feel when they hear the boss is going to be walking by their desk
  - Or the way students feel when their teacher says there will be a pop-quiz tomorrow
  - They felt motivated to clean up their act, to prepare for the test
- In other words, John’s announcement gave Israel the motivation they needed to heed his call to repent
  - They knew that if they continued in their present ways, they wouldn’t be ready for God’s arrival
  - They would miss the Kingdom because their life of sin and disregard for God would bar them, as the prophets foretold
- Finally, in Luke’s Gospel, we learn the third part of this message: the promise of the forgiveness of sins

[Luke 3:3](#) And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins;

[Luke 3:16](#) John answered and said to them all, “As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

[Luke 3:17](#) “His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

[Luke 3:18](#) So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people.

- The third and most important part of John’s message: the Gospel
  - That the Messiah was about to arrive for His people
    - The Messiah would be greater than John or any other prophet because He would offer His people forgiveness of their sins
    - He would also have the power to judge so that those who do not receive Him would come under His condemnation
  - So John was offering Israel the solution to their sin, the same solution God had offered through the earlier prophets
    - A Messiah, a Savior Who would come to save Israel from their sins
    - That all who place their trust in Him will not be disappointed
    - That the Lord is willing to extend mercy to us through this Messiah for any who accept Him as Lord
- In a nutshell, that’s what the baptism of John meant for those who took part in it
  - When they accepted John’s baptism, they were accepting His message
    - They were repenting, turning away from their sinful lives to prepare their hearts to meet God
    - They were anticipating the arrival of the Kingdom promised to Israel because they wanted to be included in it
    - And they were acknowledging they needed forgiveness for their sins, and so they placed their faith in the promise of Messiah
  - Remember, the word “baptism” comes from a Greek word meaning, “to dip”
    - It refers to the way a cloth was dyed by dipping it into bowl of liquid

- When the cloth was pulled up out of the liquid, it had taken on the color of the liquid
  - It had been baptized
- In the same sense, anyone who submitted to the baptism of John was accepting John's teaching concerning the coming Messiah
  - And therefore, they were committing themselves to follow whoever John named as the Messiah
  - John assured his followers that the Messiah was soon to appear
  - And we learn in Chapter 1 of John's Gospel that John himself was waiting to learn the identity of the Messiah too
  - And then, when John learned that Jesus was the Messiah, he directed those he had baptized to leave him and to follow Jesus
- For example, later in Acts 19, we read a story of Paul coming upon some Jewish men in Ephesus who John had baptized decades earlier

**Acts 19:1** It happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus, and found some disciples.

**Acts 19:2** He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said to him, "No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit."

**Acts 19:3** And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" And they said, "Into John's baptism."

**Acts 19:4** Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus."

**Acts 19:5** When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

- These men accepted John's baptism because they trusted in his teaching that the Messiah was soon to appear
  - But apparently, they had left Judea before Jesus' identity was revealed
  - So when Paul found them in Ephesus decades later, they had still not realized the Messiah had arrived
  - When Paul revealed that Jesus was the One John identified as Messiah, they quickly placed their faith in Jesus

- They were doing what they had committed to do when they took John's baptism
- Looking back at Matthew's gospel, he tells us that John's ministry was itself a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy
  - In v.3, Matthew says that John's ministry fulfilled Isaiah's words when he told Israel that a prophet would precede the Messiah's arrival
    - As we did last week, let's go back to the source and see this quote in its context

[Is. 40:3](#) A voice is calling,

"Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness;  
Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.

[Is. 40:4](#) "Let every valley be lifted up,

And every mountain and hill be made low;  
And let the rough ground become a plain,  
And the rugged terrain a broad valley;

[Is. 40:5](#) Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed,

And all flesh will see it together;  
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

- You remember, I taught last week that there are four proper ways we can interpret scripture
  - Each of these methods stands in addition to a purely literal view of the text
    - So we never deny the literal interpretation
    - But in many cases, we can look beyond the literal to see something more
    - And Israel's rabbis who studied scripture found four additional ways scripture could be understood beyond the literal
  - Last week, we saw Matthew using two of those methods called by their Hebrews names of *ramez* and *drash*
    - The *ramez* method recognizes that scripture can sometimes picture something greater than what's written literally

- While the *drash* method saw principles common across seemingly unrelated passages of Scripture
- Here, we see Matthew quoting Old Testament scripture once more, and this time, he's using a third method of interpretation
  - This method is called *pechat* in Hebrew, which means "simple" or "straight"
  - This method views the Scripture as meaning just what it says and nothing more
  - It's a purely literal interpretation of the text and most often, it's the proper method for interpreting the Bible
- Matthew tells us that we should use this method to understand what Isaiah wrote in Chapter 40
  - That Isaiah 40:3-5 was speaking literally about the work of John the Baptist
  - John was the voice sent to Israel, calling out to her from the wilderness
  - And the effect of this voice would be to make a smooth way in the desert, a highway for God
  - Rough ground would become easy to walk on, rugged terrain would become like a broad valley
  - And then the glory of God would be revealed, seen by all flesh according to the Word of God
- We know the voice in the wilderness refers to John's voice, but what of the various metaphors Isaiah uses to describe his work?
  - First, Isaiah says John clears a way for the Lord in the wilderness
    - That "way" refers to a way into the hearts of the people of Israel
    - John was announcing Jesus' arrival for probably 6 months before Jesus arrived
    - In doing so, John was preparing their hearts to accept Jesus once John announced Him
  - In the same way, Isaiah says the terrain of Israel would become easier to walk through

- We know there were no geographical changes to Israel's countryside when Jesus appeared
  - So here again, these are metaphors describing the hearts and attitudes of the Jewish people
  - Israel's disinterest in their sinfulness and their hard-heartedness toward God are compared to rough terrain or high mountains that can't be crossed easily
  - But because of the work of John the Baptist, hearts were awakened, attitudes softened, and repentance had taken hold
  - Like rough ground plowed and flattened to make for an easy walk
- In practical terms, the Lord was simply following the custom of the day
    - When kings or other dignitaries planned a trip, they commonly sent people ahead to ensure they were properly received
    - For example, elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus is planning to go to Samaria, and some disciples go ahead of Him to arrange a place for Jesus to sleep
    - And even today, when our President is going somewhere, an advance team goes ahead to ensure the trip goes smoothly and that a crowd is prepared to greet him
  - But in spiritual terms, John the Baptist is a beautiful example of God's grace and mercy for His people
    - The Lord extended infinite mercy and grace to the world when He placed His innocent Son on a Roman cross to save sinners like us
    - The Bible says that's the highest example of love the world has ever seen or will ever see
  - But God is so good, that He went the additional step of ensuring His people didn't miss Jesus at His coming
    - He sent someone ahead of Jesus to soften Israel's hearts, to remind them of His promises and to ensure He would be received
    - He even foretold Israel that Jesus' forerunner would come

- That's mercy, that's love
- But why send such an odd character to announce the Messiah?
  - John is living an isolated existence in the desert, looking like a homeless bum
    - He has honey and locusts stuck in his beard
    - There were probably rumors floating around back home that John was demon-possessed or crazy
    - Yet the Lord chose this man to announce Jesus' arrival
  - The answer comes in the next passage, which we will touch on briefly tonight

**Matt. 3:7** But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

**Matt. 3:8** "Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance;

**Matt. 3:9** and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham.

**Matt. 3:10** "The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

- John the Baptist is confronted by two groups of religious authorities, Pharisees and Sadducees
  - We'll take time in future weeks to get to know these men better, including their motivations
    - But tonight, let's focus on the differences between these men and John the Baptist
    - And the contrast couldn't be more stark
  - These men were the supreme religious authorities in Israel
    - They were upright, trained and approved in the finest schools, respected within society...and in the end...dead wrong
    - Apart from a few who believed in Jesus, these leaders were not men moved by the Spirit

- Therefore, they didn't understand the very Scriptures they taught others, as Jesus said to one Pharisee named Nicodemus

[John 3:9](#) Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?"

[John 3:10](#) Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?"

- So from outward appearances, the Pharisees and Sadducees were experts in God
  - Yet the truth was something very different
  - They were far from God and ignorant of His Word, though they had memorized most of it
  - And they persecuted anyone who dared to challenge their authority among the people
- Meanwhile, we have John the Baptist, who has nothing to commend himself to the people
  - He's untrained, unapproved, rough and unconventional
  - He appears out of nowhere, claiming unprecedented revelation from God Himself
  - And now, he's drawing a responsive crowd
- How do we explain this? The religious authorities certainly wanted to know
  - In my Bible, v.7 reads that the Pharisees and Sadducees were coming for baptism, but that's not an accurate rendition of the original Greek text
    - It should read "coming to John's baptism"
    - They weren't coming to submit to John's baptism, they were coming to see and investigate John's Baptism
    - And more than that, they came with the intention of discrediting John
  - John immediately recognizes their evil intentions, likely having been warned by the Lord earlier
    - And so John attacks them calling upon them to repent too
    - We'll look at his attack and their response more next time

- But already, we can see why the Lord would choose such an unlikely messenger to herald the arrival of His Son, Jesus
  - He wanted his messenger to stand apart from the religious hypocrisy of the day
  - God could have raised up anyone to do this job
  - He could have given them a knowledge of Himself and a heart to obey, and told them to preach the same message
  - Even a Pharisee could have been called into this ministry had God desired
- In fact, wouldn't a Pharisee have been the more natural choice?
  - Yes, and that's exactly the reason the Lord didn't want a Pharisee
  - It's the same reason why the Lord called John to disappear for a time into the wilderness
  - And why He took on such a strange appearance and lifestyle
- God used these things to put distance between His true messenger, John, and the established religious authorities who did not speak for God at all
  - At the same time, God made sure John could be identified with the persecuted prophets of Israel's past
    - Because God typically called the most unlikely of men to speak for Him
    - Goat herders (Amos), shepherds (David), meek (Gideon), unimpressive sorts
    - Rarely would He call a properly trained and noble individual
  - Because the Lord didn't want us explaining their expertise and knowledge of God in strictly human terms
    - Remember how the first apostles were treated when they began to teach about Jesus?
    - They were confronted by these same religious, so-called experts as John faced, and here's what they said about the apostles

[Acts 4:13](#) Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus.

[Acts 4:14](#) And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply.

- They were amazed that such untrained men could speak for God in such powerful ways
  - And they have nothing to say in response to what they see God doing
  - God silenced these so-called experts with the work of unqualified men
- Not a lot has changed in the Church since these times...God is still working in a similar way
  - As Jesus observed in His own prayer to the Father

[Matt. 11:25](#) At that time Jesus said, "I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants.

[Matt. 11:26](#) "Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight.

- God calls us, unqualified men and women, to serve Him – spiritual infants
- Because He knows how our hearts and minds tend to work
- When we see someone of great pedigree, someone accomplished and trained by the finest religious institutions speaking for God, we assume that's what it takes to know God
  - We assume these people found God because of all that training
  - And therefore, we assume we can't know the deep things of God or find them on our own
  - It's that kind of thinking that leads us to believe we need priests or imams or other religious types to bring us to God
- But God isn't found in ivory towers or through PhDs

- He doesn't reveal Himself to the proud or haughty
- He isn't interested in furthering our personal reputations
- The Lord reveals Himself to those who seek Him humbly, to infants
- To those who heed John's call to repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand
- God chose John the Baptist to announce the Messiah to mock the self-importance of Israel's religious leaders, who were leading His people astray
  - And He reveals Himself today in similar ways, to ordinary people like you and me
  - While in many cases overlooking the proud, religious experts of our day
- I speak from personal experience...I'm just missing some locust and honey in my beard
- But just because the Lord chooses to call the unqualified to serve Him, he won't leave us untrained
  - John the Baptist couldn't hold a candle to the training and accomplishments of those men who challenged him
  - But he had something they didn't...the truth of God's Word
  - Revealed to him by the Spirit of God
  - A truth God withheld from those pompous posers
- We have everything we need in the pages of the Bible