

THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

MATTHEW 3-4

When a young Edmund was tucked into bed by his British mother, he and his mum would pray. At the close of the prayer Mrs. Allenby would add, “Lord, we would not forget your ancient people, Israel; hasten the day when Israel shall again be Your people, and shall be restored to Your favor, and to their land.”

Fast forward 50 years to 1917. The world is at war. A brave general leads the Brits into battle against the Turks. The British liberate Palestine and Jerusalem.

Suddenly doors swing open for Jews worldwide to return to their homeland.

And who is the victorious general? It was *Field Marshall Edmund Allenby*.

Today there is a bridge, in southern Israel, just north of the Dead Sea. It crosses the Jordan River, and links the countries of Israel and Jordan.

It's named after *Edmund* - it's called the *Allenby Bridge*.

And just a few miles south of the bridge - in the Judean wilderness – there is a spring that feeds the Jordan River. The locals call it *Wadi Gharrar*, but the Bible refers to it as “*Bethabara*.” This is the location of what happens in Matthew 3...

Here another brave general was used by God to announce the liberation of God's ancient people. His prayer was also to restore God's favor to Israel.

Verse 1 “In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” Thirty years have elapsed between chapters 2 and 3. Jesus has been living in obscurity in a tiny Galilean village called Nazareth. He’s been working as a local carpenter.

But now *stirrings* are *occurring* in the wilderness. Jesus’ cousin, a man named John the Baptizer is announcing the kingdom and calling God’s people to repent.

Notice John’s message, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

In the Gospels the terms “kingdom of God” and “kingdom of heaven” are used interchangeably. Heaven is God’s throne. And Matthew obviously prefers the term “kingdom of heaven.” He uses it 32 times compared to “kingdom of God” 5 times.

And there’s a reason... Remember Matthew’s Gospel was written to the Jews.

At the time the Jews were looking for the coming of God’s kingdom, but they were expecting an earthly, political kingdom - a kingdom of *institutions* and *constitutions* and *revolutions*. They were looking for a militaristic solution.

That’s not the kingdom John and Jesus envisioned.

God’s kingdom would be a **heavenly**, *not an earthly kingdom*. The kingdom of God doesn’t consist of troops, or buildings, or capitols. It’s not a spot on the map.

God's kingdom consists of the values of heaven. When people submit to God as king and align their lives to His will, a little bit of heaven comes to earth. This is the kingdom of God. And if you want to be a member...*repent and submit.*

Whenever Billy Graham comes to a town for a city-wide evangelistic crusade the meetings usually run a few days. Billy is in town maybe a week.

But what many people don't realize is the organization sends an advance man. He comes to town a year ahead of time, and sets up residence. He's there to make arrangements... Well, Jesus too, had an advance man - a forerunner.

Matthew quotes Isaiah 40:3, "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.'" John was the forerunner predicted by Isaiah.

And what a bizarre character - John the Baptizer - verse 4, "And John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey." John was a wild man, an outdoorsman... I call him "*the original hippie.*" John was anti-establishment. His dress and diet were a protest.

While the Jewish priests wore their expensive robes and fancy belts, John wore a camel's hair coat and a strap of leather wrapped around his waist.

Rather than eat in Jerusalem's gourmet restaurants, John took his food with him... He carried around a pocket-full of trail mix... locust and wild honey... *gourmet grasshopper.* You

could say, *John was into organic food.*

Understand John's dress and diet was carefully choreographed...

In Malachi 4 the Old Testament closes with a prophecy of the end times and the coming of Messiah. It also predicts Elijah's appearance before His coming...

This is why John dressed like Elijah. 2Kings 1:8 says, Elijah **"was a hairy man, and wore a leather belt around his waist."** In fact, tradition says John's coat was the actual mantle (or cloak) worn by the prophet Elijah. The garment had been stored in the temple, and retrieved by John's dad, Zechariah the priest.

Remember, when the angel told Zechariah of the birth of his son, he said John would come **"in the spirit and power of Elijah."** God associated John with Elijah.

Both men had fiery personalities and a zeal for God.

It's also interesting, the area where John preached was near the site the fiery chariot picked up Elijah, and took him to heaven. Since the Jews associate the Messiah with the Prophet Elijah, John went to great effort to identify with Elijah.

Verse 5, **"Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins."**

John not only preached, but baptized – and his baptism was a new practice.

In Judaism, Gentiles who converted were baptized, but never Jews. Yet, John used baptism to announce a person's

intention to turn from sin, and follow God.

It's interesting that John's baptismal site south of the Allenby Bridge is also the place where Joshua led Israel out the wilderness and into the Promised Land.

After wandering in rebellion for 40 years the Hebrews obeyed God by crossing the river. They left behind an old life – passed through the waters – into a new life.

No doubt, the setting helped emphasize the purpose of John's baptism.

And Jews from all over the region, even the big city of Jerusalem - were traveling down to the wilderness to see John, and hear his message.

It's been said of John's ministry, "Without gimmicks or gadgets, without a mailing list or even a miracle, the crowds flocked to John. What he did possess was a dedicated life, a humble attitude, a message from God, and the power of the Spirit. The church today could learn from John's example." I agree!

John never worked a miracle, yet the people marveled at His zeal for God.

John's ministry combined three elements... the **Logos** of God's Word - the **ethos** or Christian ethics and morality - the **pathos** of a heart on fire for God.

Mix together the Bible, a godly life, and passion – and you've got a man people will want to hear. Like John the Baptist, such a man will make an impact for God.

Common Jews were not the only people who came to check out John. **“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism...”**

Whenever God’s Spirit does a work, there’ll always be religious authorities who try to take control. They’ll feel the need to officially sanction what God is doing...

This is why the Jewish leaders come out to see John...

The Sadducees were the liberals. The Pharisees were the legalists. But they were all hypocrites. That’s why John greets them with such a warm welcome...

“Brood of vipers!” You’re a bunch of venomous snakes!
“Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance.”

Understand *repentance* is more than *remorse* – simply feeling sorry for my sin. Repentance is more than tears. True repentance is the desire to change. It’s the willingness to *rearrange* my life in ways that prevent me from sinning again.

True repentance involves *renewing my commitment, re-acquiring God’s power, restructuring my time, renewing my thoughts, re-arranging my schedule, reassessing my friends, recruiting some accountability.*

There’ll be tangible evidence of sincere repentance. Repentance bears fruit.

It reminds me of the Jew who moved into a strict Catholic neighborhood - and every Friday, the Catholics went crazy. While they were limiting their diet to fish, this Jewish man was in his backyard grilling out, delicious-smelling steaks.

The Catholics decided to convert the Jew. After months they succeeded.

The Jew was taken to the priest who sprinkled him with water, and said, "Born a Jew, raised a Jew, now a Catholic." The Roman Catholics were ecstatic. Now they could eat fish without having to fight the tempting smells of steak!

But the next Friday, again the scent of steak drifted through the neighborhood.

The Catholics rushed to the Jewish man's house to "remind" him of his Catholic diet... And there they found him standing by the grill, over the sizzling steak.

With a knife in one hand, and his other hand dipping in water, there he was sprinkling the meat, while saying, "Born a cow, raised a cow, now a fish!"

My point is - true conversion will produce fruits worthy of repentance. You'll see a change. There's a problem if it's the same ole same ole after you're baptized.

Verse 9, "And do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones." The Jews trusted in their pedigree – their birth certificate.

They thought family connection was a substituted for faith – *not so!* Just because you were a *child of Abraham* didn't make you a *child of God*.

"And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees." In other words, judgment has come! "Therefore every tree which

does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Hey, the *fruit of your life* will reveal the *root of your life*.

Good roots produce good shoots. Watch the ideas and behavior that flow out of a person long enough - and you'll have a good indication of what's in their heart.

And this is why John knew his water baptism was only the first step.

He says in verse 11, “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.” John showed folks their need to change, but he was powerless to effect those changes. Water baptism is the *symbol* of the change not its *source*. *The change agent is the Holy Spirit.*

John baptized with water, but only Jesus can baptize with the Holy Spirit. *John paved the way, but John was not the way. We need the power of the Holy Spirit.*

I'm convinced the same problem exists today.

Too many people know only the baptism of John. They come to church and are convicted of sin. They leave with the determination to resist temptation, and walk in victory.

They've turned from sin... but Satan is powerful, and his temptations are strong. It doesn't take long before Satan pulls them back into his web.

He has them on a string. They're repeatedly remorseful, but can't break free.

Here's the problem... It's hard to turn from a temptation –

and not turn back - *unless I can turn to something more powerful than that temptation.*

This is why I need to be baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit.

He floods me with His love, joy, peace, and power – all stronger than the lures of Satan. When I'm caught up in God's influence the desire to sin is diminished.

If you long for victory, ask Jesus to baptize you with the power of the Spirit.

Verse 11 closes, **“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”** Some people interpret fire as passion and zeal. I believe it speaks of judgment.

For verse 12 follows, **“His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”** The Spirit's baptism is part of God's harvest.

There are just two types of kernels – the wheat and the chaff – believers and unbelievers. They have just two destinies – the barn or the fire - heaven or hell.

Here's God's intention for every human. In the end, we're either, **juiced** or **judged** – filled with the Spirit or thrown into the fire. It's the Spirit or the fire.

Verse 13 **“Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him.”** But John was reluctant. He felt unworthy. He knew Jesus... **“John tried to prevent Him, saying, “I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?”**

“But Jesus answered and said to him, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he allowed Him.

“When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water...”

Apparently Jesus was immersed. I'm not a Baptist. I'm just a Bible-believing Christian, but if you want to be baptized like Jesus you need to be dunked.

“And behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Hey, Jesus was baptized for 3 reasons: to **reveal**, **relate**, and **reaffirm**.

His baptism **revealed** to the crowd that Jesus was the Messiah. The Father spoke. The Spirit descended on Him in the form of a dove. People heard *the voice* and *saw the dove*. Heaven had spoken. It was a powerful testimony.

His baptism was also a way for Jesus to **relate** to the folks who would follow Him. We're baptized to identify with Jesus. He was baptized to identify with us.

Lastly, Jesus' baptism **reaffirmed** His own identity. Theologians debate as to when Jesus became conscious of His true identity. I believe Jesus somehow knew He was God from His mother's womb. *But at His baptism it was affirmed to Him in an undeniable way.* Jesus' baptism was His final preparation for His ministry.

As we mentioned, there's a 30-plus year gap between chapters 2 and 3.

The Gospels cover the events surrounding Jesus' birth, and the last 3½ years of His life, but what happened in between – *before His arrival at the Jordan?*

In one sense we have no idea... Where did Jesus go to school? Who were His influences? What about His jobs? Or the places He visited? They're all unknown.

But in another sense we know exactly what Jesus did in those 30-plus silent years. For at His baptism the Father spoke from heaven and declared, **“This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”** Whatever Jesus did and wherever He went - He did only those things that pleased His Father. Jesus had no sin.

Chapter 4 begins, **“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”** It's important to realize this was not a surprise attack.

Satan didn't orchestrate this encounter. *Jesus was being led by the Spirit.*

Often when we encounter temptation we assume we made a wrong turn along the way. Not necessarily. God uses temptation to test, and toughen, and tune our faith. It's not Satan, but the Holy Spirit, who calls the shots when we're tempted.

“And when He had fasted 40 days and 40 nights, afterward He was hungry.”

Talk about stating the obvious. I can't go 40 hours without food, let alone 40 days. I miss a meal and suddenly I'm famished. I'm fasting. I can't function.

It's no surprise Satan tempts Jesus at His weakest moment. Jesus' energy is depleted. His defenses are down. It's then the roaring lion moves in for the kill.

Hey, Satan is watching you and waiting for the same moment in your life.

Notice the enemy's first temptation. **"Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread."**

When I ask, what's the first temptation Satan throws at Jesus - most people answer, *"Turn the stones to bread."* But that's not actually the first temptation.

Look at what Satan says in verse 3, **"If You are the Son of God..."** He uses the same bait in verse 6. Satan wants Jesus to doubt His identity - and in an attempt to prove who He is - make a mistake. This is why Jesus' baptism was pivotal preparation. God affirmed Jesus' identity just prior to this temptation.

And I'm convinced this is Satan's first line of attack with us. If the devil can cause you to question your connection with God - he can cut off your supply line to heaven, and break-up your communication with headquarters.

But if we know we're God's kids, we'll trust Jesus and draw from His strength.

Hey, when the devil comes to tempt you, remind him that you belong to Jesus.

In verse 3 Satan tempts Jesus. “Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.”

But notice the weapon Jesus uses to defend Himself against Satan – He quotes Scripture. All three times He’s tempted, Jesus quotes God’s Word.

Jesus pulls the sword of the Spirit from its sheath, and slays the devil with God’s written word. The Bible is a powerful weapon against Satan.

Study it, apply it, and then use it against the devil!

I love the story in 2 Samuel 23 about Eleazar, son of Dodo. But this Eleazar was not a dodo. He was one of David’s mighty men. It’s reported of Eleazar.

“He arose and attacked the Philistines until his hand was weary, and his hand stuck to the sword. The LORD brought about a great victory that day...”

Eleazar clutched his sword so tightly he couldn’t pry his hand loose. It was this vice-grip that led to victory. If you want to win victories over temptation and Satan don’t be a *dodo* – make like *the son of Dodo* – and get a grip on God’s Word.

Back to Jesus in verse 4, “But He answered and said, “It is written (Jesus quotes from the Law - *Deuteronomy 8:3*), ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’ ”

To Jesus the words of God were more important than His daily bread.

“Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down.”

And notice this time Satan quotes Scripture. Satan is telling Jesus, He’s not the only person who reads the Bible. Satan quotes two verses from *Psalms 91*.

“For it is written: ‘He shall give His angels charge over you,’ and, ‘In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.’” I hope you realize Satan is quite a Bible scholar. He knows Scripture from cover to cover - inside and out. He specializes in twisting and distorting its clear meaning... as he does here.

But “Jesus said to him, “It is written again, ‘You shall not tempt the LORD your God.’” Jesus fires back with *Deuteronomy 6:16* – the correct and balanced view.

Yes, God promises to protect us when we live and move in His will. But if we knowingly, deliberately, foolishly step outside the boundaries of God’s will - we’re on our own. Tempt God – test His patience - and He might just let you suffer the consequences of your own actions. Hey, God is the author of reality therapy.

Verse 8 “Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, “All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me.”

This was a test of patience. The Father in heaven had already promised Jesus the kingdoms of this world. Satan was just offering it to Him **now... why wait?**

In essence, Satan was saying, *why suffer the rigors of the cross when I can give the world to you right now?* How often are we tempted to sidestep or avoid the cross – the cost of commitment – in our relationship with God?

In God's economy, **giving precedes getting - you sow then you reap - suffering often comes before blessing - serving then ruling - the cross first, then the crown.**

Finally, the Lord has had enough. **“Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.’”** Again Jesus quotes Scripture. This time Deuteronomy 6:13 and 10:20.

“Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him.”

In 1 John 2:16 we're told what makes the world go round, **“For all that is in the world - the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life - is not of the Father but is of the world.”** Here are three universal temptations Satan has used on all people, in all times... These are the same temptations he uses today...

“The lust of the flesh” – the desire to feel great...

“The lust of the eyes” – the desire to look great...

And **“the pride of life” – the desire to be great...**

You'll find every temptation of Satan appeals along one of these three lines - **feel great, look great, be great.** Satan used the same formula to tempt Jesus...

Turn these stones to bread... **“Jesus you don't have to starve - feel great.”**

Throw yourself off the Temple – and command angels to catch you – *“You’ll look great. You’ll be on the nightly news. You’ll become famous.”*

Bow to me and I’ll give you the kingdoms of the world – *“You’ll be great.”*

Rather than yield to the temptation to *feel great, look great, be great* – and grab what He could from this life - Jesus made decisions based on His relationship with God... **purpose over pleasure – character over attention – eternity over now.**

Because Jesus knew who He truly was spiritually, He chose **the spiritual over the physical - the internal over the external - the eternal over the temporal.**

Again, the key to victory over temptation is to know who you are in Christ!

Verse 12 tells us, **“Now when Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, He departed to Galilee.”** Evidently, John’s incarceration was a divine signal for Jesus to commence His ministry. John said, **“He must increase, but I must decrease.”**

As John exits the stage, Jesus moves to center stage.

Verse 13 **“And leaving Nazareth, He came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is by the sea...”** *Capernaum* means **“village of Nahum.”** It was a fishing village on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, with a population of about 1500 people. Capernaum would serve as Jesus’ headquarters for His next 3½ years of His ministry.

Matthew also tells us Jesus dwelt “in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles: The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death Light has dawned.”

The major caravan route that connected Mesopotamia and Egypt passed through Galilee. It was called the “Via Maris” – Latin for “the way of the sea.”

Isaiah 9 had predicted that the people living along the Via Maris would see a “great light.” Jesus would walk this road for 3½ years shining the light of God.

Notice too the Galilee was known as the “shadow of death” – this was because of the frequent wars that were fought there between the Jews and their enemies.

Matthew also mentions the “Galilee of the Gentiles” this was the Golan Heights, the area east of the Sea of Galilee. It was heavily populated with Gentiles.

Rather than headquarter his ministry in the religious center of the nation, Jerusalem - Jesus taught and worked miracles in the war-ravaged Galilee, among common folk like hard-working fishermen - even Gentiles.

“From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Notice, Jesus took over where John left off. They both came preaching the same message. *Turn from you sin, and submit your life to God.*

“Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen.”

Then He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men."

Notice, Jesus took the natural occupation of Peter and Andrew, and gave it spiritual significance. He tells fishermen that He'll make them fishers of men.

This is the way Jesus works in our lives... He redeems our ambitions, and interests, and training – then He re-directs them in an eternal direction.

If you're a musician, or a gardener, or an athlete – Jesus will find some way to take your background - expand on it - refocus it - then use it for His glory.

We believe Simon and Andrew were brothers in a prosperous fishing business, *the P and A Fish Company*. But there was something so irresistible about Jesus, when He called them... **“They immediately left their nets and followed Him.”**

There was no hesitation in their response. They left all to follow Jesus.

“Going on from there, He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets.

And He called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him.” Jesus found Peter and

Andrew *fishing*, but He found James and John *mending* their nets. **Could it be that Jesus made them *menders of men*?**

It's true. Peter was an evangelist, but John was more a pastor. He was known as "*the apostle of love*". His letters encouraged the Church to grow spiritually and love one another. Hey, Jesus calls both **fishers of men**, and **menders of men**.

Verse 23 **"And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people."** There were over 200 small villages in the Galilee during the first century. Jesus regularly toured these villages.

On Sundays He'd preach in Stone Mountain, then go to Barrow County...

The last two verses summarize Jesus' ministry and His growing popularity.

"And His fame went throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all sick people who were afflicted with various diseases and torments, and those who were demon-possessed, epileptics, and paralytics; and He healed them."

Jesus not only preached to their spirit, but he brought healing to their body. In fact, Jesus' ability to heal disease was proof of His power to save souls.

Verse 25 **"Great multitudes followed Him - from Galilee, and from Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan."** These locations constituted a 100 mile radius. It was a three day journey from Jerusalem to Capernaum.

The point is all kinds of people were traveling long distances to see Jesus. Remember that when you complain about the 20 minute drive to church...