
MACARTHUR'S NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY:

Matthew 3 & 4

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MacArthur's New Testament Commentary: Matthew 1-7
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Matthew 3:1

The Man

Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, (3:1)

Now in those days serves as a transition between chapters 2 and 3. It was a common literary phrase, indicating the general time in which the events being described occurred. Nearly thirty years had elapsed between Joseph's taking the young Jesus and His mother to Nazareth and the beginning of John's public ministry. Only Luke (2:39-52) tells us anything of Jesus' life during the intervening years. Apart from that brief account, Scripture is silent.

John was a common Jewish name in New Testament times and is the Greek form of the Hebrew *Johanan* (see 2 Kings 25:23; Jer. 40:8; etc.), which means "Jehovah, or Yahweh, is gracious." **Baptist**, or Baptizer (*baptistes*; the Greek ending, *tes*, signifies one who performs an act), was an epithet given him because baptizing was such an important and obvious part of his ministry.

John's father and mother "were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord." But they had no children and, like Sarah before Isaac was conceived, Elizabeth was beyond normal childbearing years (Luke 1:6-7; cf. Gen. 17:17). One day as John's father was performing his priestly function in the Temple, "an angel of the

Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense” (Luke 1:11). The angel proceeded to tell Zacharias that “Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord” (vv. 13-15). John was named by God Himself and set apart for greatness even before he was conceived!

John would “be filled with the Holy Spirit, while yet in his mother’s womb. And he [would] turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God” (Luke 1:15-16). Most significantly of all, he would “go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah... so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (v. 17). John’s own father, himself “filled with the Holy Spirit” declared that John “will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you [John] will go on before the Lord to prepare His ways” (vv. 67, 76). “And the child continued to grow and to become strong in spirit, and he lived in the deserts until the day of his public appearance to Israel” (v. 80).

That was John. His conception was miraculous, he was filled with the Holy Spirit before he was born, he was great in the sight of God, and he was to be the herald of the Messiah, announcing and preparing the people for His coming. It is therefore not strange that Jesus said, “There has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist” (Matt. 11:11). That great man was a sovereignly designed and chosen herald for the great King.

Came is from *paraginomai*, which often was used to indicate an official arrival, such as that of the magi (Matt. 2:1), or the public appearance of a leader or teacher (Matt. 3:13). For thirty years both John and Jesus had lived in relative obscurity. Now the coming of the herald signified the coming of the King. The beginning of John’s ministry signaled the beginning of Jesus’ ministry (see Acts 10:37-38).

Preaching is from *kerusso*, the primary meaning of which is “to herald.” It was used of the official whose duty it was to proclaim loudly and extensively the coming of the king. Matthew also uses this term with reference to Jesus and the apostles.

John knew his position and his task. He never sought or accepted honor for himself, but only for the One whose coming he proclaimed. As a child John no doubt had been told many times of the angel’s announcement of his birth and his purpose, a purpose from which he never wavered, compromised, or tried to gain personal recognition or advantage. When questioned by the priests and Levites who had been sent from Jerusalem to ask his identity, John replied, “I am not the Christ” (John 1:19-20). He also denied being Elijah and “the Prophet” (v. 21; cf. Deut. 18:15). When they persisted in knowing who he was, he simply said, “I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as Isaiah the prophet said” (v. 23).

The question about his being Elijah introduces some important truth. At every orthodox Passover ceremony even today a cup is reserved at the table for Elijah.

At the circumcision of orthodox Jewish baby boys a chair is placed for Elijah. The anticipation is that, if Elijah would ever come and sit in the chair or drink from the cup, the Messiah's arrival would be imminent. That belief is based on Malachi 4:5-6, in which the prophet predicts, "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. And he will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers."

Yet, as he himself testified, John the Baptist was not the literal, resurrected Elijah most Jews of his day were expecting, or that many Jews of our own day expect. But he was indeed the Elijah that the prophet Malachi predicted would come. Luke 1:17 confirms that when it says that John "will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah."

That the Elijah who was commonly expected by the Jews was not the Elijah of God's plan was stated plainly by Jesus Himself after John the Baptist had been imprisoned and killed. "Elijah is coming and will restore all things; but I say to you, that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished.'... Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist" (Matt. 17:11-13).

Because the Jews rejected John the Baptist as the true Elijah who was to come, they prevented the complete fulfillment of the prophecy as God had originally given it through Malachi. "If you care to accept it," Jesus explained about John, "he himself is Elijah, who was to come" (Matt. 11:14). But John not only was not accepted, he was ridiculed, imprisoned, and beheaded. Because he was not received by the great body of God's chosen people, he was not able to be the Elijah and there is therefore an Elijah yet to come. Some interpreters believe he will be one of the two witnesses of Revelation 11, but we cannot be certain. In any case, John the Baptist was rejected as the coming Elijah. And just as the herald was rejected, so was the King he heralded. John was beheaded, and Jesus was crucified. Israel therefore was set aside, and the kingdom was postponed.

Everything about John the Baptist was unique and amazing—his sudden public appearance, his life-style, his message, his baptizing, and his humility. He was born to a mother who was barren. He was a priest by heritage but became a prophet. He forsook his earthly father's ministry for the sake of his heavenly Father's. After spending most of his life in the desert, at the right moment God spoke to his heart, and he began to thunder out the message God had given him in that desert—to announce the coming of the King.

John's primary place of ministry; like his primary place of training, was in the wilderness of Judea. By the world's standards and procedures, the coming of a king, or of a great person of any sort, is proclaimed and prepared for with great expense, pomp, and fanfare. Even the announcer dresses in the best suits, stays in the best hotels, contacts only the best people, and makes preparations for the monarch to visit only the best places. But that was not God's plan for the heralding of His Son. John the Baptist was born of obscure parents, dressed strangely even for his day, and carried on his ministry mostly in out-of-the-way

and unattractive places.

All of that, however, was not incidental or circumstantial. It was symbolic of John's ministry to call the people away from the corrupt and dead religious system of their day—away from ritualism, worldliness, hypocrisy, and superficiality. John called them away from Jerusalem and Jericho, away from the cities into the **wilderness**—where most people would not bother to go if they were not serious seekers. John brought them away, where they were freer to listen, think, and ponder, without the distractions and the misleading leaders they were so accustomed to following. In such a seemingly desolate place, they could begin to see the greatness of this man of God and the even greater greatness of the One whose coming he announced.

Matthew 3:2

The Message

The message John proclaimed was simple, so simple it could easily be summarized in one word: **repent** (3:2a; cf. Acts 13:24; 19:4). The Greek word (*metanoeo*) behind **repent** means more than regret or sorrow (cf. Heb. 12:17); it means to turn around, to change direction, to change the mind and will. It does not denote just any change, but always a change from the wrong to the right, away from sin and to righteousness. In his outstanding commentary on Matthew; John A. Broadus observes that “wherever this Greek word is used in the New Testament the reference is to changing the mind and the purpose from sin to holiness.” Repentance involves sorrow for sin, but sorrow that leads to a change of thinking, desire, and conduct of life. “The sorrow that is according to the will of God,” Paul says, “produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation” (2 Cor. 7:10; cf. v. 9). John's command to **repent** could therefore be rendered “be converted.”

John's message of preparation for the coming of the King was repentance, conversion, the demand for a completely different life. That must have been startling news for Jews who thought that, as God's chosen people—the children of Abraham, the people of the covenant—they deserved and were unconditionally assured of the promised King. Knowing what they must have been thinking, John later told his listeners, “Do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (3:9). God was not interested in His people's human heritage but in their spiritual life. “what the King wants from you,” John was saying, “is that you make a complete turnaround from the way you are, that you be totally converted, totally changed.” God calls for radical change and transformation that affects the mind, the will, and the emotions—the whole person. John's point was simple: “You are in the same condition as the Gentiles. You have no right to the kingdom unless you repent and are converted from sin to righteousness.” He called for a true repentance that results in the fruit of a translated life (v. 8) and that includes baptism with water (v. 11a). Failure to

repent would result in severe judgment, as Matthew 11:20-24 and 12:38-41 demonstrate.

Repentance was exactly the same message with which Jesus began His preaching and the apostles began theirs. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand,” Jesus proclaimed; “repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15; cf. Matt. 3:2; 4:17; Luke 5:32). Mark 6:12 says of the twelve: “And they went out and preached that men should repent.” In his Pentecost sermon, Peter’s concluding words were, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38; cf. Acts 3:19; 20:21; 26:18).

The close connection between repentance and conversion is also indicated in texts that do not specifically use the word repentance, yet convey the same idea (see Matt. 18:3; Luke 14:33). The best summary statement may be that of Paul in Acts 26:20, where he states that the objective of his ministry was that men “should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.”

The Motive

The motive John gave for repentance was: **the kingdom of heaven is at hand** (3:2*b*). The people should repent and be converted because the King was coming, and He deserves and requires no less. The unrepentant and unconverted cannot give the heavenly King the glory He deserves, do not belong to the heavenly King, and are unfit for His heavenly kingdom.

After four hundred years, the people of Israel again heard God’s prophetic word. Malachi’s prophecy was followed by four centuries of silence, with no new or direct word from the Lord. Now; when His word came to Israel again, proclaiming the coming of the King, it was not the expected word of joy and comfort and celebration but a message of warning and rebuke. The kingdom of heaven is at hand, waiting to be ushered in, but Israel was not ready for it.

Despite many similar warnings by the prophets, many of the people and most of the leaders were not prepared for John’s message. What he said was shocking; it was unexpected and unacceptable. It was inconceivable to them that, as God’s people, they had anything to do to inherit God’s kingdom but simply wait for and accept it. The Messiah was *their* Messiah, the King was *their* King, the Savior was *their* Savior, the promise was *their* promise. Every Jew was destined for the kingdom, and every Gentile was excluded, except for a token handful of proselytes. That was the common Jewish thinking of the day, which John totally shattered.

But John’s message was God’s message, and he would not compromise it or clutter it with the popular misconceptions and delusions of his own day and his own people. He had no word but God’s word, and he proclaimed no kingdom but God’s kingdom and no preparation but God’s preparation. That preparation was repentance. God’s standard would not change, even if every Jew were excluded

and every Gentile saved. God knew that some Jews would be saved, but none apart from personal repentance and conversion.

Although the precise phrase is not found there, the **kingdom of heaven** is basically an Old Testament concept. David declares that “the Lord is King forever and ever” (Ps. 10:16; cf. 29:10), that His kingdom is everlasting, and that His dominion “endures throughout all generations” (Ps. 145:13). Daniel speaks of “the God of heaven [who] will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed” (Dan. 2:44; cf. Ezek. 37:25), a “kingdom [that] is an everlasting kingdom” (Dan. 4:3). The God of heaven is the King of heaven, and the heavenly kingdom is God’s kingdom.

Matthew uses the phrase **kingdom of heaven** thirty-two times, and is the only gospel writer who uses it at all. The other three use “the kingdom of God.” It is probable that Matthew used **kingdom of heaven** because it was more understandable to his primarily Jewish readers. Jews would not speak God’s name (Yahweh, or Jehovah), and would often substitute *heaven* when referring to Him—much as we do in such expressions as “heaven smiled on me today.”

There is no significant difference between “the kingdom of God” and **the kingdom of heaven**. The one phrase emphasizes the sovereign Ruler of the kingdom and the other emphasizes the kingdom itself, but they are the same kingdom. Matthew 19:23-24 confirms the equality of the phrases by using them interchangeably.

The kingdom has two aspects, the outer and the inner, both of which are spoken of in the gospels. Those aspects are evident as one moves through Matthew. In the broadest sense, the kingdom includes everyone who professes to acknowledge God. Jesus’ parable of the sower represents the kingdom as including both genuine and superficial believers (Matt. 13:3-23), and in His following parable (vv. 24-30) as including both wheat (true believers) and tares (false believers). That is the outer kingdom, the one we can see but cannot accurately evaluate ourselves, because we cannot know people’s hearts.

The other kingdom is the inner, the kingdom that includes only true believers, only those who, as John the Baptist proclaimed, repent and are converted. God rules over both aspects of the kingdom, and He will one day finally separate the superficial from the real. Meanwhile He allows the pretenders to identify themselves outwardly with His kingdom.

God’s kingly rule over the hearts of men and over the world may be thought of as having a number of phases. The first is the *prophesied* kingdom, such as that foretold by Daniel. The second phase is the *present* kingdom, the one that existed at the time of John the Baptist and that he mentions. It is the kingdom that both John and Jesus spoke of as being **at hand** (cf. 4:17). The third phase may be referred to as the *interim* kingdom, the kingdom that resulted because of Israel’s rejection of her King. The King returned to heaven and His kingdom on earth now exists only in a mystery form. Christ is Lord of the earth in the sense of His being its Creator and its ultimate Ruler; but He does not presently exercise His

full divine will over the earth. He is, so to speak, in a voluntary exile in heaven until it is time for Him to return again. He reigns only in the hearts of those who know Him as Savior and Lord. For those “the kingdom of God is... righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).

The fourth phase can be described as the *manifest* kingdom, in which Christ will rule, physically, directly, and fully on earth for a thousand years, the Millennium. In that kingdom He will rule both externally and internally—externally over all mankind, and internally in the hearts of those who belong to Him by faith. The fifth, and final, phase is the “*eternal* kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,” which “will be abundantly supplied” to all of His own (2 Pet. 1:11).

Had God’s people Israel accepted their King when He first came to them, there would be no interim kingdom. The kingdom at hand would have become the kingdom of a thousand years, which, in turn, would have ushered in the eternal kingdom. But because they killed the forerunner of the King and then the King Himself, the millennial kingdom, and consequently the eternal kingdom, were sovereignly postponed.

Matthew 3:3

The Mission

For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet, saying, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight!’” (3:3)

The mission of John the Baptist had long before been described by **Isaiah the prophet** (see Isa. 40:3-4). Here Matthew again emphasizes fulfilled prophecy in the coming of Jesus Christ as divine King (cf. 1:22; 2:5, 15, 17). But as herald of the great King, John did not clear the roads and highways of obstacles, but sought to clear men’s hearts of the obstacles that kept them from the King. **The way of the Lord** is the way of repentance, of turning from sin to righteousness, of turning moral and spiritual **paths** that are crooked into ones that are **straight**, ones that are fit for the King. “Let every valley be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low;” Isaiah continues, “and let the rough ground become a plain, and the rugged terrain a broad valley; then the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together” (Isa. 40:4-5). The call of John’s voice that was **crying** [βοῶντος] **in the wilderness** of Judea was the shouting of urgency commanding people to repent, to confess sin and the need of a Savior. **His paths** (tribous) are well known, as the Greek term implies, because they are clearly revealed in Scripture.

Matthew 3:4

The Manner

Now John himself had a garment of camel's hair, and a leather belt about his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey (3:4)

John must have been a startling figure to those who saw him. He claimed to be God's messenger, but he did not live, dress, or talk like other religious leaders. Those leaders were proper, well-dressed, well-fed, sophisticated, and worldly. John obviously cared for none of those things and even made a point of forsaking them. His **garment of camel's hair** and his **leather** belt about his waist were as plain and drab as the wilderness in which he lived and preached. His clothes were practical and long-wearing, but far from being comfortable or fashionable. He was much like the first Elijah in that regard (2 Kings 1:8). His diet of locusts and wild honey was as spartan as his clothing. It was nourishing but little else.

John's very dress, food, and life-style were in themselves a rebuke to the self-satisfied and self-indulgent religious leaders of Israel—the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and priests. It was also a rebuke to most of the people, who, though they may not have been able to indulge in the privileges of their leaders, nonetheless admired and longed for the same advantages.

John's purpose was not to turn the people into hermits or ascetics. He called on no one, not even his disciples, to live and dress as he did. But his manner of living was a dramatic reminder of the many loves and pleasures that keep people from exchanging their own way for God's.

Matthew 3:5

The Ministry

Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. (3:5-6)

The immediate effect of John's preaching was dramatic. People were coming from the great city of **Jerusalem**, which was a considerable distance away. They came, in fact, from **all** Judea, and all the district around the Jordan. In other words they were coming from all over southern Palestine, including both sides of the Jordan River. As Matthew reports later in his gospel, the people recognized John as a prophet (21:26).

That those Jews submitted to being baptized was more than a little significant, because that was not a traditional Jewish ceremony. It was completely different from the Levitical washings, which consisted of washing the hands, feet, and head. The Essenes, a group of Jewish ascetics who lived on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, practiced a type of ceremonial washing that more nearly resembled baptism. But both the Levitical and the Essene washings were repeated, those of the Essenes as much as several times a day or even hourly. They represented repeated purification for repeated sinning.

John's washing, however, was one-time. The only one-time washing the Jews performed was for Gentiles, signifying their coming as outsiders into the true faith of Judaism. A Jew who submitted to such a rite demonstrated, in effect, that he was an outsider who sought entrance into the people of God—an amazing admission for a Jew. Members of God's chosen race, descendants of Abraham, heirs of the covenant of Moses, came to John to be baptized like a Gentile!

That act symbolized before the world that they realized their national and racial descent, or even their calling as God's chosen and covenant people, could not save them. They had to repent, forsake sin, and trust in the Lord for salvation. It is that of which the baptism was a public witness, as they confessed their sins. They had to come into the kingdom just like the Gentiles, through repentance and faith—which included a public admission of sins (cf. the same Greek term [exomologeō] in Phil. 2:11, where it refers to a verbal confession).

We know from subsequent accounts in the gospels that many of those acts of repentance must have been superficial and hypocritical, because John soon lost much of his following, just as Jesus would eventually lose most of His popularity. But the impact of John's ministry on the Jewish people was profound and unforgettable. The way of the King had been announced to them, and they had no excuse for not being ready for His coming.

Six things demonstrate the true greatness of John. (1) He was filled with and controlled by the Spirit, even from "his mother's womb" (Luke 1:15b). (2) He was obedient to God's Word. From childhood he followed God's will, and from it he never wavered. (3) He was self-controlled, drinking neither "wine or liquor" (Luke 1:15a). In his food, dress, and life-style he was temperate and austere. (4) He was humble. His purpose was to announce the king, not to act kingly or take for himself any of the king's prerogatives. Speaking of Jesus, John said, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals" (Mark 1:7), and on a later occasion, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). (5) He courageously and faithfully proclaimed God's Word, thundering it across the wilderness as long as he was free to preach, to whomever would listen. (6) Finally, he was faithful in winning people to Christ, in turning "back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God" (Luke 1:16). He stands as a pattern for all who seek genuine greatness.

Matthew 3:7

6

THE FRUITS OF TRUE REPENTANCE

(3:7-12)

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? Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance; and

do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” (3:7-12)

Matthew records but this one sample of the preaching of John the Baptist. The parallel account in Luke (3:1-18) gives more details, but the message is the same: a call to repentance and baptism, an inner change of mind and heart, along with an outward act that symbolized that change—and, even more importantly, a manner of living that *demonstrated* the change. The “many other exhortations” that John preached (Luke 3:18) possibly consisted primarily of more examples of the **fruit in keeping with repentance** (v. 8) that he gave in addition to those mentioned in verses 11-14.

John’s preaching was simple and his message was limited to that which was most essential, but he faithfully fulfilled his singular calling as the herald of God’s coming great King. He performed his ministry with a boldness, courage, power, and single-minded devotion that caused that King to say of him, “Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist” (Matt. 11:11).

In the narrative of 3:7-12 Matthew focuses on four elements: the congregation, the confrontation, the condemnation, and the consolation.

Matthew 3:7

The Congregation

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, (3:7a)

Among the great number of people who came out to see John in the wilderness (v. 5) were **many of the Pharisees and Sadducees**, whom the Baptist singled out for special warning and rebuke.

By New Testament times three groups, or sects, had developed that were quite distinct from the rest of Judaism. Besides the two mentioned here (and frequently in the gospels and Acts), were the Essenes. Most of the Essenes were unmarried, but they often adopted children from other Jewish families. These secretive and ascetic Jews lived for the most part in isolated, exclusive, and austere communities such as the now-famous Qumran, on the northwest shore of

the Dead Sea. They spent much of their time copying the Scriptures, and it is to them that we owe the valuable and helpful Dead Sea Scrolls—discovered by accident in 1947 by an Arab shepherd boy. But the Essenes had little contact with or influence on the society of their own day and are nowhere mentioned in the New Testament.

THE PHARISEES

The **Pharisees**, however, were a great contrast to the Essenes. They were equally, if not more, exclusive, but were found for the most part in the larger cities such as Jerusalem. They were an association very much in the mainstream of Jewish life and made a point of being noticed and admired. Jesus exposed them as doing “all their deeds to be noticed by men... and they love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi” (Matt. 23:5-7; cf. 6:2, 5).

We have no specific documentation as to exactly how or when the Pharisee sect began, but it is likely that it developed out of a former group called the Hasidim, whose name means “pious ones” or “saints.” The Hasidim came into being in the second century B.C., during the intertestamental period. Palestine had been under the Hellenistic (Greek) rule of the Seleucid Syrian kings for many years. Jewish patriots, under the leadership of Judas Maccabaeus, revolted when Antiochus Epiphanes tried to force his pagan culture and religion on the Jews. That despicable tyrant even profaned the Temple by sacrificing a pig on the altar and forcing the sacrificed meat down the throats of the priests—a double abomination to Jews, because the law of Moses forbade them to eat pork (Lev. 11:4-8; Deut. 14:7-8). The Hasidim were among the strongest supporters of the revolt, until its leaders began to become worldly and politicized.

Many scholars believe that the **Pharisees**, and likely the Essenes also, descended from the Hasidim. The word *Pharisee* means “separated ones,” and members of the sect diligently tried to live up to their name. Admission to the group was strictly controlled by periods of probation lasting up to one year, during which the applicant had to prove his ability to follow ritual law. They separated themselves not only from Gentiles but from tax collectors and any others whom they considered to be base “sinners” (Luke 7:39). They even looked with disdain on the common Jewish people, whom a group of Pharisees in Jerusalem once referred to as “accursed” (John 7:49). After leaving the marketplace or any public gathering, they would as soon as possible perform ceremonial washings to purify themselves of possible contamination from touching some unclean person.

The Pharisees formed a self-righteous, “holy” community within the community; they were legalistic isolationists who had no regard or respect for those outside their sect. They believed strongly in God’s sovereignty and in divine destiny and that they alone were the true Israel. They considered themselves to be superspiritual, but their “spirituality” was entirely external,

consisting of the pursuit of meticulous observance of a multitude of religious rituals and taboos, most of which they and various other religious leaders had devised over the previous several centuries as supplements to the law of Moses. These were known collectively as “the tradition of the elders,” concerning which Jesus gave the Pharisees one of His strongest rebukes, charging them with “teaching as doctrines the precepts of men” (Matt. 15:2-9).

By the time of Christ, the **Pharisees** had lost most of whatever nationalism they may earlier have had. Another sect, the Zealots, had become the association for those whose primary concern was Jewish independence. The Pharisees’ single loyalty was to themselves, to their traditions and to their own influence and prestige. By their strict adherence to those traditions they expected to reap great reward in heaven. But they were the epitome of religious emptiness and hypocrisy, as Jesus often pointed out (Matt. 15:7; 22:18; 23:13, 23, 25; etc.). The Pharisees “outwardly [appeared] righteous to men, but inwardly [were] full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matt. 23:28).

THE SADDUCEES

The **Sadducees** were at the other end of the Jewish religious spectrum—the ultraliberals. The origin of their name is uncertain, but many modern scholars believe it is derived from Zadok (Sadok in the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament), the name of a man who was priest under David (2 Sam. 8:17) and chief priest under Solomon (1 Kings 1:32). This sect also arose during the intertestamental period, but from among the priestly aristocracy. They were compromisers, both religiously and politically. They cared little for Greek culture, with its emphasis on philosophy and intellectualism, but were greatly attracted to the pragmatic, practical Romans.

The Sadducees claimed to accept the law of Moses as the supreme and only religious authority, and they scorned the legalistic traditions of their antagonists, the Pharisees. In New Testament times they were still closely associated with the priestly class (see Acts 5:17), to the extent that the terms *chief priest* and *Sadducee* were used almost synonymously (as were the terms *scribe* and *Pharisee*). But they cared little for religion, especially doctrine, and denied the existence of angels, the resurrection, and most things supernatural (Acts 23:6-8). Consequently they lived only for the present, getting everything they could from whomever they could—Gentiles and fellow Jews alike. They believed in extreme human autonomy and in the unlimited freedom of the will. They considered themselves masters of their own destinies.

The Sadducees were much fewer in number than the Pharisees and were extremely wealthy. Among other things, under the leadership of Annas they ran the Temple franchises—the money exchanging and the sale of sacrificial animals—and charged exorbitantly for those services. It was therefore the Sadducees’ business that Jesus damaged when he drove the moneychangers and sacrifice sellers out of the Temple (Matt. 21:12-13).

Because of their great wealth, Temple racketeering, and affiliation with the Romans, the Sadducees were much less popular with their fellow Jews than were the Pharisees, who were strongly religious and had some measure of national loyalty.

Religiously, politically, and socially the **Pharisees and Sadducees** had almost nothing in common. The Pharisees were ritualistic; the Sadducees were rationalistic. The Pharisees were strict separatists; the Sadducees comprising collaborators. The Pharisees were commoners (most of them had a trade), while the Sadducees were aristocrats. Both groups had members among the scribes and were represented in the priesthood and in the Jewish high council, the Sanhedrin; yet they were in almost constant opposition to each other. During New Testament times about the only common ground they exhibited was opposition to Christ and His followers (Matt. 22:15-16, 23, 34-35; Acts 4:1; 23:6).

They had one other common religious and spiritual ground. The Pharisees expected their reward in heaven, while the Sadducees expected theirs in this life, but the trust of both groups was in personal works and self-effort. Both emphasized the superficial and nonessential, and had no concern for the genuine inner spiritual life or for the welfare of their fellow man. That was “the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees,” the hypocritical, self-serving, dead externalism about which Jesus warned His disciples (Matt. 16:6).

Throughout most of its history the church has had its own brands of Pharisees and Sadducees, its ritualists and its rationalists. The one looks for salvation and blessing through prescribed ceremonies and legalistic practices; the other finds religious meaning and purpose in private, existential beliefs and standards. One is conservative and the other is liberal, but the hope and trust of both groups is in themselves, in what they can perform or accomplish by their own actions and wills.

It is probably because of that deeper spiritual commonness that Matthew speaks of them as one group, emphasized by the use of a single definite article (**the**) rather than two (“*the* Pharisees and *the* Sadducees”). It is clear from John’s response to them that he considered their basic problem and need to be exactly the same.

This group was coming for baptism, the Greek preposition *epi* (**for**) being used in a construction that clearly indicates purpose. In light of John’s unorthodox dress and style and his prophetic and authoritative exhortations, it is hard to imagine why the self-righteous and proud Pharisees and Sadducees would ask to be baptized by him. Some of them may simply have been curious. It seems more probable, however, that they suspected that John might indeed be a prophet, as many of the people believed (Matt. 14:5), and that they wanted to check him out as thoroughly as they could. If he were a genuine prophet perhaps they could gain his approval, parade the pretense of repentant spirituality, and capitalize on or even take over the movement—in the way religious opportunists still do today. Whatever their reasons were, they were wrong, wicked reasons. They were not

seeking God's truth or God's working in their own lives. They were not repentant; they had not confessed their sins; they had not changed at all—as John well knew. They were not genuinely seeking the true righteousness that delivers from judgment. They were the same smug, self-righteous hypocrites they had been when they started out to find John.

The Confrontation

he said to them, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” (3:7b)

John's awareness of the insincerity and lack of repentance of the Pharisees and Sadducees is evident in those strong words. They intended to carry their hypocrisy even to the extent of submitting to John's baptism, out of whatever corrupt motives they may have had. *Genne ma* (**brood**) may also be translated “offspring,” signifying descendants or children. Jesus used the same epithet (**brood of vipers**) to describe the Pharisees on several occasions (Matt. 12:34; 23:33). **Vipers** (*echidna*) were small but very poisonous desert snakes, which would have been quite familiar to John the Baptist. They were made even more dangerous by the fact that, when still, they looked like a dead branch and were often picked up unintentionally. That is exactly what Paul did on the island of Malta when he went to gather wood for a fire after the shipwreck. As indicated by the response of the natives who were befriending Paul and the others, the bite of the **viper** was often fatal, though Paul miraculously “suffered no harm” (Acts 28:3-5).

Calling the Pharisees and Sadducees a **brood of vipers** pointed up the danger of their religious hypocrisy—as well as the fact that their wicked work had been passed on to them by the original serpent (Gen. 3:1-13) through their spiritual forefathers, of whom they were the **brood**, or offspring. Like the desert viper, they often appeared to be harmless, but their brand of godliness (cf. 2 Tim. 3:5) was venomous and deadly. In His series of woes against the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus said, “You shut off the kingdom of heaven from men; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in” (Matt. 23:13). They were responsible for keeping countless Jews out of the kingdom, and therefore from salvation and spiritual life.

In Matthew 23:33 Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees “serpents” as well as a “brood of vipers,” suggesting even more directly that their true spiritual father was Satan—as He specifically charges in John 8:44 (cf. Rev. 12:9; 20:2). These religious hypocrites were Satan's children doing Satan's deceitful work.

The question **Who warned you to flee** continues the viper figure. A brush fire or a farmer's burning the stalks in his field after the harvest would cause vipers and other creatures to **flee** before the flames in order to escape. It was a common sight in many of the Mediterranean and Arab regions, and one that John

the Baptist doubtlessly had seen many times. The implication is that the Pharisees and Sadducees were expecting John's baptism to be a kind of spiritual fire insurance, giving protection from the flames of **the wrath to come**. True repentance and conversion *do* protect from God's **wrath** and judgment, but superficial and insincere professions or acts of faith tend only to harden a person against genuine belief; giving a false sense of security. John would not be party to such hypocrisy and sham. It was the deceitfulness of their true master, Satan, and not genuine fear of God's judgment, that led them out to hear John and to seek his baptism as a pretentious formality.

John's indictment must have deeply stung those false religious leaders, who considered themselves to be far above the common man in their relationship to God and His kingdom. John, and Jesus after him, characterized them as deceivers rather than leaders, perpetuators of spiritual darkness rather than spiritual light, children of the devil rather than sons of God.

Matthew 3:8

The Condemnation

Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance; and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (3:8-10)

The marks of a truly repentant heart are **fruit in keeping with repentance**, or as Paul described them to King Agrippa, "deeds appropriate to repentance" (Acts 26:20). In his parallel account Luke mentions several examples of the kind of **fruit** John was talking about. To the general multitude he said, "Let the man who has two tunics share with him who has none; and let him who has food do likewise" (Luke 3:11). To the tax-gatherers he said, "Collect no more than what you have been ordered to" (v. 13), and to some soldiers he said, "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages" (v. 14).

As James points out, "Faith, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:17). John says in his first epistle, "The one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous" (1 John 3:7); and that "if someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (4:20). Our actions toward our fellow men are indicators of our true attitude toward God.

AXIOS (in keeping with) has the root idea of having equal weight or worth, and therefore of being appropriate. True **repentance** not only should but *will* have correspondingly genuine works, demonstrated in both attitudes and actions. Right relationship to God brings right relationship to our fellow human beings, at

least as far as our part is concerned (cf. Rom. 12:18). Those who claim to know Christ, who claim to be born again, will demonstrate a new way of living that corresponds to the new birth.

The Pharisees and Sadducees knew a great deal about repentance. That God fully and freely remits the sins of a penitent is a basic doctrine of Judaism. The ancient rabbis said, "Great is repentance, for it brings healing upon the world. Great is repentance, for it reaches to the throne of God," and, "A man can shoot an arrow for a few furlongs, but repentance reaches to the throne of God." Some rabbis maintained that the law was created two thousand years before the world, but that repentance was created even before the law. The clear meaning of repentance in Judaism has always been a change in man's attitude toward God that results in a moral and religious reformation of the individual's conduct. The great medieval Jewish scholar Maimonides said of the traditional Jewish concept of repentance: "what is repentance? Repentance is that the sinner forsakes his sin, puts it out of his thoughts, and fully resolves in his mind that he will never do it again."

Such understanding of repentance is basically consistent with the teaching of the Old Testament. Repentance always involves a changed life, a renouncing of sin and doing righteousness. The Lord declared through Ezekiel, "when the righteous turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, then he shall die in it. But when the wicked turns from his wickedness and practices justice and righteousness, he will live by them" (Ezek. 33:18-19). Hosea pleaded, "Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to Him, 'Take away all iniquity; and receive us graciously'" (Hos. 14:1-2). After Jonah's reluctant but powerful warning to Nineveh, "God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, [and] then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it" (Jonah 3:10). Nineveh brought **forth fruit in keeping with repentance.**

The idea that repentance is evidenced by renunciation of sin and by righteous living did not originate with John the Baptist, but had long been an integral part of orthodox Judaism. Faithful rabbis had taught that one of the most important passages in Scripture was, "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless; defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Isa. 1:16-17).

Theologian Erich Sauer, in *The Triumph of the Crucified* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951, p. 67), speaks of repentance as "a threefold action. In the understanding it means knowledge of sin; in the feelings it means pain and grief; and in the will it means a change of mind." True repentance first of all involves understanding and insight, intellectual awareness of the need for moral and spiritual cleansing and change. Second, it involves our emotions. We come to feel the need that our mind knows. Third, it involves appropriate actions that result from what our mind knows and our heart feels.

Recognition of personal sin is the important first step. But by itself it is

useless, even dangerous, because it tends to make a person think that mere recognition is all that is necessary. A hardened pharaoh admitted his sin (Ex. 9:27), a double-minded Balaam admitted his (Num. 22:34), a greedy Achan acknowledged his (Josh. 7:20), and an insincere Saul confessed his (1 Sam. 15:24). The rich young ruler who asked Jesus how to have eternal life went away sorrowful but not repentant (Luke 18:23). Even Judas, despairing over his betrayal of Jesus, said to the chief priests and elders, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood" (Matt. 27:4). All of those men recognized their sin, yet none of them repented. They were experiencing what Paul called "the sorrow of the world" that "produces death" instead of the "godly sorrow" that "produces a repentance" (2 Cor. 7:10-11).

True repentance will include a deep *feeling* of wrongdoing and of sin against God. David begins his great penitential psalm by crying out, "Be gracious to me, O God, according to Thy lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Thy compassion blot out my transgressions" (Ps. 51:1). He not only clearly saw his sin but deeply felt his need to be rid of it. In another psalm he declared, "When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long" (Ps. 32:3).

The sorrow of true repentance is like David's; it is sorrow for offense against a holy God, not simply regret over the personal consequences of our sin. Sorrow over being found out or over suffering hardship or discipline because of our sin is not godly sorrow; and has nothing to do with repentance. That sort of sorrow is but selfish regret, concern for self rather than for God. It merely adds to the original sin.

Even acknowledgement of sin and feeling of offense against God do not complete repentance. If it is genuine, it will result in a changed life that bears **fruit in keeping with repentance**. David, after confessing and expressing great remorse for his sin against God, determined that, with God's help, he would forsake his sin and turn to righteousness. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me... Then I will teach transgressors Thy ways, and sinners will be converted to Thee" (Ps. 51:10, 13). Fruit is always seen in Scripture as manifested behavior (cf. Matt. 7:20).

The great Puritan Thomas Goodwin called for repentance with these striking words:

Fall down upon thy knees afore him, and with a heart broken to water, acknowledge, as Shimei, thy treason and rebellions against him who never did thee hurt; and acknowledge, with a rope ready fitted to thy neck by thy own hands, as they Benhadad's servants wore; that is, confessing that if he will hang thee up, he may.... Tell Him that He may shew his justice on thee, if he will; and present thy naked breast, thy hateful soul, as a butt and mark for him, if He please, to shoot his arrows into and sheathe his sword in. Only desire him to remember that he

sheathed his sword first in the bowels of his Son, Zech. 13:7, when he made his soul an offering for sin. (*The Works of Thomas Goodwin* [Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1863], 7:231)

Another Puritan, William Perkins, wrote, “Godly sorrow causeth grief for sin, because it is sin. It makes any man in whom it is to be of this disposition and mind, that if there were no conscience to accuse, no devil to terrify, no Judge to arraign and condemn, no hell to torment, yet he would be humbled and brought on his knees for his sins, because he hath offended a loving, merciful, and long-suffering God.”

Ultimately, of course, repentance like that is a gift of God. Speaking to the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish council, Peter and some of the other apostles said, “He [Jesus] is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:31). Some while later, after he himself had finally been persuaded by God that the Gentiles were eligible for the kingdom (10:1-35), Peter managed to convince skeptical Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, who then “glorified God, saying, ‘Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life’” (11:18). Paul called Timothy to be a gentle bond-servant of the Lord in proclaiming the truth to the lost in the hope that “God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:25-26).

It was clearly not God-given repentance that the Pharisees and Sadducees professed before John. Of all people they should have known the meaning of true repentance, but they did not. They were hypocrites and phonies, as John well knew. He had seen absolutely no evidence of true repentance, and he demanded to see such evidence before he would baptize them. As in the case of all baptisms since John, they are to be outward signs of inward transformation.

John’s words to those religious leaders was at once a rebuke and an invitation: **Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance.** “You have shown no evidence of it,” he was saying, “but now you have opportunity to truly repent if you mean it. Show me that you have turned from your wicked hypocrisy to genuine godliness, and I will be glad to baptize you.” The rabbis taught that the gates of repentance never close, that repentance is like the sea, because a person can bathe in it at any hour. Rabbi Eleazar said, “It is the way of the world, when a man has insulted his fellow in public, and after a time seeks to be reconciled to him, that the other says, ‘You insult me publicly, and now you would be reconciled to me between us two alone! Go bring the men in whose presence you insulted me, and I will be reconciled to you.’ But God is not so. A man may stand and rail and blaspheme in the market place and the Holy One says, ‘Repent between us two alone, and I will receive you.’” (cited in William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], 1:56).

Some years ago a well-known man in public ministry openly and repeatedly

ridiculed a fellow minister. After many months of criticism, the first man decided that he was wrong in what he had done and went to the other minister asking his forgiveness. It was reported that the one who had been criticized replied, "You attacked me publicly and you should apologize publicly. When you do I will forgive you."

There is no reason to believe that John the Baptist intended to humiliate the Pharisees and Sadducees or demand some sort of public demonstration of their sincerity. But he insisted on seeing valid evidence of true repentance and would not be party to their using him to promote their own selfish and ungodly purposes.

Knowing what they were probably thinking, John continued, **and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, "We have Abraham for our father."** They believed that simply being Abraham's descendants, members of God's chosen race, made them spiritually secure. Not so, John said, **for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.** Descent from Abraham was not a passport to heaven. It was a great advantage in knowing and understanding God's will (Rom. 3:1-2; 9:4-5), but without faith in Him that advantage becomes a more severe condemnation. If Abraham himself was justified only by his personal faith (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:1-3), how could his descendants expect to be justified in any other way (Rom. 3:21-22)?

Many Jews of New Testament times believed, and many Orthodox Jews of our own day still believe, that simply their Jewishness assures them a place in God's kingdom. The rabbis taught that "all Israelites have a portion in the world to come." They spoke of the "delivering merits of the fathers," who passed on spiritual merit to their descendants. Some even taught that Abraham stood guard at the gates of Gehenna, or hell, turning back any Israelite who happened that way. They claimed that it was Abraham's merit that enabled Jewish ships to sail safely on the seas, that sent rain on their crops, that enabled Moses to receive the law and to enter heaven, and that caused David's prayers to be heard.

That was the sort of presumption John the Baptist rebuked. No descent from Abraham, no matter how genetically pure, could make a person right with God. Jesus contradicted the similar claims of another group of Pharisees, except in even stronger terms than John's. After they self-righteously asserted, "Abraham is our father," Jesus said, "If you are Abraham's children, do the deeds of Abraham. But as it is, you are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God; this Abraham did not do" (John 8:39-40). Our Lord went on to say that their deeds proved their father was actually Satan. In Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus, it is overlooked that the rich man in hell addresses Abraham as "Father," and Abraham, speaking from heaven, calls the rich man his "Child." But the rich man was then told by Abraham, "Between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us" (Luke 16:25-26). A child of Abraham in hell was beyond their thinking.

The Jews generally considered Gentiles to be the occupants of hell, spiritually lifeless and hopeless, dead stones as far as a right relationship with God is concerned. It may be that John played on that figure in declaring that **God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham**, that is, true children of Abraham who come to the Lord as Abraham did, by faith. When the Roman centurion asked Jesus to heal his servant simply by saying the word, Jesus replied, “Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. And I say to you, that many shall come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom [i.e., Israelites] shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:10-12).

In John’s preaching, as in the Old Testament prophets, judgment was closely connected with salvation in the coming of the Messiah. Those men of God saw no gap between His coming to save and His coming to judge. Isaiah wrote of the “shoot” that would “spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots” who would “decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth; and He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked” (Isa. 11:1, 4). Speaking again of the Messiah, Isaiah wrote, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted;... to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God” (Isa. 61:1-2; cf. Joel 3). In his blessing of the infant Jesus in the Temple, Simeon said of Him, “Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel” (Luke 2:34).

Israel experienced a foretaste of God’s judgment in the ravaging of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, only about forty years after John the Baptist preached. Every unbeliever likewise faces a certain judgment when he dies, and even before death people may suffer foretaste judgments from God because of sin and rebellion. As the book of Proverbs repeatedly reminds us (1:32-33; 2:3-22; 3:33-35; etc.), God makes certain that ultimately, and even to a great extent in this life, the good will reap goodness and the evil will reap evil (cf. Rom. 2:5-11).

John apparently believed that God’s ultimate judgment was imminent. Because the Messiah had arrived, **the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.**

At the end of every harvest season the farmer would go through his vineyard or orchard looking for plants that had borne no good fruit. These would be cut down to make room for productive vines and trees and to keep them from taking nutrients from the soil that were needed by the good plants. A fruitless tree was a worthless and useless tree, fit only to be **cut down and thrown into the fire.** Jesus used a similar figure in describing false disciples. “If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned” (John 15:6). Fruitless repentance is worthless and useless; it means absolutely nothing to God.

Fire is a frequent biblical symbol of the torment of divine punishment and judgment. Because of their exceptional wickedness, Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by “brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven” (Gen. 19:24). After Korah, his men, and their households were swallowed up by the earth and “went down alive to Sheol... fire also came forth from the Lord and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering the incense” (Num. 16:32-33, 35). In His role as a righteous Judge, God is frequently called “a consuming fire” (Ex. 24:17; Deut. 4:24; 9:3; etc.). In the last chapter in the Old Testament, Malachi speaks of the coming day that will be “burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze” (Mal. 4:1). John’s preaching picked up where Malachi left off, and Jesus Himself often spoke of the fires of hell (Matt. 5:22, 29; Mark 9:43, 47; Luke 3:17; etc.).

John was speaking specifically to the unrepentant Pharisees and Sadducees, but his message of judgment was to every person, **every tree... that does not bear good fruit**, who refuses to turn to God for forgiveness and salvation and therefore has no evidence, no **good fruit**, of genuine repentance. Salvation is not verified by a past act, but by present fruitfulness.

Matthew 3:11

The Consolation

As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. (3:11-12)

With the message of judgment John also gives a measure of hope and consolation. Here he speaks specifically of the Messiah, who had come in order that no one need face God’s judgment.

First, John explains how his baptism differed from that of the Messiah: **I baptize you with water for repentance**. John’s baptism reflected a ritual the Jews often used when a Gentile accepted the God of Israel. The ceremony was the mark of an outsider’s becoming a part of the chosen people. In John’s ministry it marked the outward profession of inward **repentance**, which prepared a person for the coming of the King. As the apostle Paul explained many years later, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus” (Acts 19:4).

The second baptism mentioned here is by the Messiah, a baptism by the One John says **is coming after me** and who **is mightier than I**, whose **sandals** John was **not fit to remove**. One of the lowliest tasks of a slave in that day was

removing the sandals of his master and any guests and then washing their feet. It was the symbol Jesus Himself used in teaching His disciples to be servants (John 13:5-15). The humility of John, one mark of his spiritual stature, is evident in this description of the One he heralded and is consistent with his expression in John 3:30 that “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

Among the ways in which the Messiah would be **mightier** than John would be in His baptism **with the Holy Spirit**. The Holy Spirit was promised by Jesus to His disciples as “another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you” (John 14:16-17). At Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4) and during the initial formation of the church (Acts 8:5-17; 10:44-48; 19:1-7), the promised Holy Spirit did come upon the disciples, baptizing them and establishing them in the body of Christ. Though without such dramatic attending signs, every believer since that time is baptized into the church by Christ with God’s Spirit. “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free” (1 Cor. 12:13).

John’s word about the Holy Spirit must have been comforting and thrilling to the faithful Jews among his hearers, those who hoped for the day when God would “pour out [His] Spirit on all mankind” (Joel 2:28), when He would “sprinkle clean water on [them],” and “give [them] a new heart and put a new spirit within [them]” (Ezek. 36:25-26). In that day they would at last be baptized in the very power and person of God Himself.

The third baptism mentioned here is that of **fire**. Many interpreters take this to be a part of the Holy Spirit baptism, which began at Pentecost and which in that instance was accompanied by “tongues of fire” (Acts 2:3). But the Acts account says that those tongues “appeared to them” (that is, the waiting disciples) “as of fire.” They were not fire, but looked like licks of fire. In his last promise of the soon-coming baptism with the Holy Spirit, Jesus said nothing about actual fire being a part of the experience (Acts 1:5). And when, a short time later, Cornelius and his household were baptized with the Holy Spirit, no fire was present (Acts 10:44; 11:16; cf. 8:17; 19:6).

Other interpreters take the **fire** to represent a spiritual cleansing, as described in the quotation above from Ezekiel. But nothing in Ezekiel’s text, in the context of John’s message here, or in the Pentecost reference to the tongues “as of fire” relates to such cleansing.

Consequently, it seems best to consider fire as representing God’s coming judgment, which, as we have seen, is so frequently in Scripture symbolized by fire. In both the preceding and following verses (10, 12) John clearly uses fire to represent judgment and punishment. It is impossible that the middle reference to fire would concern an entirely different subject. Both of the adjoining verses contrast the fates of believers and unbelievers, those who bear good fruit and those who do not (v. 10) and the valuable wheat and the worthless chaff (v. 12). It therefore seems logical and natural to take verse 11 also as a contrast between

believers (those baptized **with the Holy Spirit**) and unbelievers (those baptized with the **fire** of God's judgment).

As in the preceding two verses, John again gives consolation to believers but warning to unbelievers: **And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.** The figure is changed to that of a farmer who has just harvested his grain crop.

In Palestine, as in many other parts of the ancient world, farmers made a **threshing floor** by picking out a slight depression in the ground, or digging one if necessary, usually on a hill where breezes could be caught. The soil would then be wetted and packed down until it was very hard. Around the perimeter of the floor, which was perhaps thirty or forty feet in diameter, rocks would be stacked to keep the grain in place. After the stalks of grain were placed onto the floor, an ox, or a team of oxen, would drag heavy pieces of wood around over the grain, separating the **wheat** kernels from the **chaff**, or straw. Then the farmer would take a **winnowing fork** and throw a pile of grain into the air. The wind would blow the chaff away, while the kernels, being heavier, would fall back to the floor. Eventually, nothing would be left but the good and useful **wheat**.

In a similar way the Messiah will separate out everyone who belongs to Him and, like a farmer, **He will gather His wheat into the barn**, where it will be forever safe and protected. Also in a similar way to the farmer's, **He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.** The long-awaited Messiah would Himself perform both functions, though not in the time and sequence that John and the prophets before him may have thought. The final separation and the ultimate judgment will be only at Christ's second coming, when the unsaved "will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matt. 25:46). That scene is dramatically presented by our Lord in the parable of the tares (Matt. 13:36-43) and the parable of the dragnet (Matt. 13:47-50).

John's introduction to the person and ministry of the Messiah prepared the people for the arrival of their King.

Matthew 3:13

7

THE CORONATION OF THE KING

(3:13-

17)

Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him. But John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" But Jesus answering said to him, "Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all

righteousness.” Then he permitted Him. And after being baptized, Jesus went up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.” (3:13-17)

Though Matthew does not use the terms, we see in this passage what might be called the divine commissioning, or the coronation, of the King. The gospel writer has given us the King’s ancestry (1:1-17), His arrival (1:18-25), His adoration (2:1-12), His attestation (2:13-23), and His announcement (3:1-12). Now we see His anointing, His coronation.

There is something strikingly majestic about this great event that brings all the preceding events into focus. Here, for the first time, the Lord Jesus Christ comes fully onto the stage of the gospel story. Here is where His ministry and work truly begin. Everything before this, even those events which directly involved the young Jesus, were introductory and preparatory. Bethlehem, Egypt, and Nazareth are all behind. From this day on the Son of Man would call no place His earthly home (8:20), but was to move about fulfilling His mission.

After an eternity of glory in heaven and some thirty years of virtual obscurity on earth, the Messiah-King is manifested publicly for the world to see and know. As “the voice of one crying in the wilderness,” John the Baptist had faithfully prepared the way for the King, even as Isaiah had prophesied (3:3; Isa. 40:3). The herald of the King had announced the coming of the King, and now the King Himself appears for His coronation.

One cannot fail to be aware that in these few verses Matthew reports the three central and absolutely critical aspects of Jesus’ coronation as King of kings: the baptism of the Son, the anointing of the Spirit, and the confirmation of the Father. As clearly as in any passage in Scripture we see here the revelation and the working of the Trinity—the Son, the Spirit, and the Father. Because He is no earthly King and His is no earthly kingdom, no men crowned Him—only God, while men watched.

Matthew 3:13

Baptism of the Son

Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him. But John tried to prevent Him, saying, “I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?” But Jesus answering said to him, “Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he permitted Him. (3:13-15)

We will first look at some of the details of the baptism and then at its significance.

We are not told the exact time to which the **then** refers, and Matthew no doubt uses the term simply to show the general sequence of events. We do not know the precise length of John's ministry, but according to Luke he began preaching "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee... in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas" (3:1-2). The best assumption is that it occurred in the year A.D. 29, quite a few months, perhaps nearly a year, before Jesus' baptism. John also continued to preach for a while afterward, causing his ministry to be ending as Jesus' ministry was beginning.

We know that John was about six months older than Jesus (Luke 1:26) and that Jesus began His ministry when He "was about thirty years of age" (Luke 3:23). If John began preaching at the same age, he would have been ministering for about six months when Jesus came to him for baptism. But we have no reason to believe that the two began ministering at the same age. And though we know how old Jesus was when He began, we are given no reason as to why He began at that age.

Some scholars suggest that the age of 30 was the generally accepted age for Jewish religious leaders to begin their ministry. According to Numbers 4:30, priests entered the priesthood at that age. But that provision was temporary, because a short while later the age was lowered to 25 (Num. 8:24) and later to 20 (1 Chron. 23:24)—where it continued to be through the reign of Hezekiah (2 Chron. 31:17) and even through the Captivity (Ezra 3:8). We therefore lack clear insight, either biblical or traditional, as to why either John or Jesus began to minister when they did.

We know from the parallel passage in Luke that when **Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan**, He did not come for a private ceremony. "Now it came about when all the people were baptized, that Jesus also was baptized" (Luke 3:21) Jesus was not to have a private, secret anointing as David first did (1 Sam. 16:13; cf. 2 Sam. 2:4).

Arrived is from *paraginomai*, which, as we saw in relation to the magi (2:1) and John the Baptist ("came," 3:1), was often used to indicate an official arrival or public appearance. We learn from Mark 1:9 that Jesus not only came from **Galilee**, but specifically from Nazareth, when He came to see **John**. It is clear from all the gospel accounts (cf. Mark 1:9; Luke 3:21; John 1:29) that Jesus came alone. No family members or friends accompanied Him, and He had as yet called no disciples.

We do not know exactly where on **the Jordan** River John was then baptizing, though it seems likely it was toward the southern end, and therefore near Jericho and the Dead Sea. John tells us that it was near "Bethany beyond the Jordan" (John 1:28), but the precise location of that town is uncertain.

We know from John's greeting to Jesus that he recognized Him immediately, but we have no idea how well they knew each other at this time. They were cousins, and before their births Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months in

the hill country of Judah, where the two women shared with each other their wonderful blessings (Luke 1:39-56). Elizabeth knew before Jesus' birth that Mary's child would be the Messiah, because she addressed Mary as "the mother of my Lord" (Luke 1:43). Surely Elizabeth would often have shared this wonderful news with her son John, the one whom the angel had told her husband would be "the forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17; cf. v. 66). Both boys grew physically and spiritually (Luke 1:80; 2:40), but they did so separately—Jesus in Nazareth and John in the wilderness. It may be, therefore, that they had little, if any, ongoing firsthand acquaintance with one another.

Jesus came **to John** specifically **to be baptized by him**, as indicated by the aorist passive infinitive (*baptisthe nai*), which emphasizes purpose. But the idea of Jesus' being baptized by him was unthinkable to John. He not only knew Jesus' human identity but His divine identity. The apostle John tells us that John the Baptist "saw Jesus coming to him, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God!'" (John 1:29). John knew that this was God's own anointed Messiah, come to fulfill God's redemptive purpose. The Baptist's first reaction to Jesus' request for baptism was **I have need to be baptized by You**.

It is not difficult to understand John's concern. His baptism was for confession of sin and repentance (3:2, 6, 11), of which he himself had need; but Jesus had no sins to confess or be forgiven of. John's baptism was for those who turned from their sin and thereby became fit for the arrival of the great King. Why, then, would the sinless King Himself want to be baptized?

An ancient apocryphal book called *The Gospel According to the Hebrews* suggests that Jesus asked for baptism because His mother and brothers wanted Him to: "Behold, the mother of the Lord and His brethren said to Him, 'John the Baptist baptizeth for the remission of sins, let us go and be baptized by him.' But He said to them, 'What sin have I committed that I should go and be baptized by him, except perchance this very thing that I have said in ignorance?'" The writer of that spurious gospel saw the problem, but his solution was purely speculative and is incongruous with the rest of the New Testament.

For others in the early centuries, Jesus' coming for baptism seemed to pose no problem at all. Those who were strongly influenced by Gnostic philosophy believed that until His baptism Jesus was just an ordinary man, sinful like every other man. At His baptism he was endowed with deity by the divine *logos* (Word), the "Christ Spirit." His baptism was therefore necessary to purify Him and make Him suitable to receive the divine endowment. Like the rest of the Gnostic views, that idea does not square with Scripture. Jesus was *born* the Son of God (Luke 1:32, 35) and was called "'Immanuel,' which translated means 'God with us,'" even before His birth (Matt. 1:23).

It was because John the Baptist was fully aware of Jesus' deity and sinlessness that he **tried to prevent Him**. The Greek verb is in the imperfect tense (*dieko luen*) and suggests a continued effort by John—"he kept trying to

prevent Him.” The verb is also a compound, whose prepositional prefix (*dia*) intensifies it. The pronouns in John’s statement are all emphatic, giving evidence of his bewilderment. ***I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?*** He did not directly contradict Jesus, as Peter would do (Matt. 16:22), but he thought that somehow he surely misunderstood what Jesus intended, that He could not possibly mean what He seemed to be saying.

John resisted baptizing Jesus for exactly the opposite reason that he resisted baptizing the Pharisees and Sadducees. They were in great need of repentance but were unwilling to ask for it and gave no evidence of having it. John therefore refused to baptize them, calling them a “brood of vipers” (3:7). Jesus, by contrast, came for baptism, though He alone of all mankind had no need of repentance. John refused to baptize the Pharisees and Sadducees because they were totally unworthy of it. Now he was almost equally reluctant to baptize Jesus, because He was too worthy for it.

John knew that his baptism for repentance from sin was totally inappropriate for Jesus. John acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Why should the One who takes away sin submit Himself to a ceremony that represents confession and repentance of sin?

John’s attempt to **prevent** Jesus from being baptized is therefore a testimony to Jesus’ sinlessness. This prophet, of whom the Lord Himself said there had “not arisen anyone greater” (Matt. 11:11), knew that he himself was not sinless. ***I have need to be baptized by You, he told Jesus, and do You come to me?*** “I am only a prophet of God,” John was saying, “and I am sinful like everyone whom I baptize. But You are the Son of God and sinless. You are not a sinner. Why, then, do you ask me to baptize You?” Among John’s many God-given insights into who Jesus was, what He was like, and what He had come to do, was his knowledge that the One who now stood before Him was without sin. In a less direct but yet definite way, John declared with the writer of Hebrews that Jesus, though “tempted in all things as we are, [is] yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). So even in his reluctance to baptize Christ, John was fulfilling the role of a herald and the office of a prophet by proclaiming the perfection of the Savior.

Why did Jesus, who was even more aware of His own sinlessness than John was, want to submit Himself to an act that testified to confession and repentance of sin? Some interpreters suggest that He intended His baptism to be a sort of initiatory rite for His high priesthood, reflecting the ceremony which prepared the Old Testament priests for their ministry. Others suggest that Jesus wanted to identify Himself with the Gentiles, who were initiated into Judaism as proselytes by the act of baptism. Still others take Jesus’ baptism to be His recognition and endorsement of John’s authority, His accrediting of John as a true prophet of God and the genuine forerunner of His own ministry. A fourth view is that the Lord intended to be baptized vicariously for the sins of mankind, making His baptism, along with His atoning death on the cross, a part of His sin-bearing, redemptive work.

But none of those views is supported by Scripture, and none fits the context of the present passage. Jesus Himself explains to John His reason for wanting to be baptized. In His first recorded words since the age of twelve, when He told His parents, “Did you not know that I had to be in My Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49), Jesus said, **Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.** These are words of royal dignity and humility.

Jesus did not deny that He was spiritually superior to John or that He was sinless. **Permit it at this time** was an idiom meaning that the act of His baptism, though not seemingly appropriate, was indeed appropriate for this special time. Jesus understood John’s reluctance and knew that it came from deep spiritual commitment and sincerity. He gave permission for John to do what, without divine instruction, he would never have been willing to do. He assured the prophet that **in this way it is fitting**, and went on to explain to John that His baptism was important for both of their ministries, **for us to fulfill all righteousness.** For God’s plan to be perfectly fulfilled, it was necessary for Jesus to be baptized and to be baptized specifically by John.

It seems that one reason Jesus submitted to baptism was to give an example of obedience to His followers. As the King of kings Jesus recognized that He had no ultimate obligation to pay taxes to a human government. When Peter on one occasion asked about the matter, Jesus replied, “‘What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect customs or poll-tax, from their sons or from strangers?’ And upon his saying, ‘From strangers,’ Jesus said to him, ‘Consequently the sons are exempt. But, lest we give them offense,... give it [a stater coin] to them for you and Me’” (Matt. 17:25-27). As Scripture makes clear in many places, it is proper and right for believers, even though they are sons of God, to honor and pay taxes to human governments (see Rom. 13:1-7; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13-15). In every case, Jesus modeled obedience. In His baptism He acknowledged that John’s standard of righteousness was valid and in action affirmed it as the will of God to which men are to be subject.

Jesus came into the world to identify with men; and to identify with men is to identify with sin. He could not purchase righteousness for mankind if He did not identify with mankind’s sin. Hundreds of years before Christ’s coming, Isaiah had declared that the Messiah “was numbered with the transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors” (Isa. 53:12). Jesus’ baptism also represented the willing identification of the sinless Son of God with the sinful people He came to save.

That was the first act of His ministry, the first step in the redemptive plan that He came to fulfill. He who had no sin took His place among those who had no righteousness. He who was without sin submitted to a baptism for sinners. In this act the Savior of the world took His place among the sinners of the world. The sinless Friend of sinners was sent by the Father “in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh” (Rom. 8:3); and He “made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the

righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21; cf. Isa. 53:11). There was no other way **to fulfill all righteousness.**

Jesus’ baptism not only was a symbol of His identity with sinners but was also a symbol of His death and resurrection, and therefore a prefigurement of Christian baptism. Jesus made only two other references to personal baptism, and each related to His death. Not long before His final trip to Jerusalem He told His disciples, “I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished!” (Luke 12:50). On the other occasion He was responding to the request by James and John that they be given the top positions in His heavenly kingdom. “You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” (Mark 10:38). Jesus’ supreme identification with sinners was His taking their sin upon Himself, which He did at Calvary.

Though John, having been given such a brief explanation, could not possibly have comprehended the full meaning of Jesus’ baptism, he accepted His Lord’s word and obeyed. **Then he permitted Him.**

Matthew 3:16

Anointing of the Spirit

And after being baptized, Jesus went up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon Him, (3:16)

John’s baptism, and that of Jesus’ disciples during His earthly ministry (John 4:1-2), represented cleansing, or washing, from sin. Christian baptism represents the believer’s identification with Christ’s death and resurrection (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12). In both cases the significance of the act is lost if it does not involve immersion. Sprinkling or pouring does not fit either the symbolism of cleansing or of dying and being raised.

The Greek word itself (*baptizo*) means literally to dip an object into water or other liquid, not to have the liquid put on the object. If all the forms of this word in Scripture had been translated (as “immersed”) instead of being simply transliterated (as “baptized”)—first into Latin and then into modern languages—the confusion we now see regarding the mode of baptism would never have arisen. In relation to other things the same word is translated—as we see in Luke 16:24, where the rich man in Hades asks that Lazarus might “dip [from *baptizo*] the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue,” and John 13:26, where Jesus “dipped [also from *baptizo*] the morsel.” As can be determined from any Greek lexicon, the original word never had a meaning other than dipping or submerging, and no other term is used for baptizing.

The Christian church knew no form of baptism but immersion until the Middle Ages, when the practice of sprinkling or pouring was introduced by the

Roman Catholic church—which itself had previously always baptized by immersion. The great Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) said, “In immersion the setting forth of the burial of Christ is more plainly expressed, in which this manner of baptizing is more commendable.” The Catholic church did not recognize other modes until the Council of Ravenna, held in France in 1311. It was from the Catholic church that Lutheran and Reformed churches inherited the form of sprinkling or pouring. The Church of England did not begin the practice of sprinkling until 1645. The Eastern Orthodox church has never permitted any mode but immersion.

That Jesus **went up immediately from the water** indicates that He had been all the way into the water. John was baptizing *in* the Jordan (3:6), and his custom was to baptize where “there was much water” (John 3:23), which would have been pointless if only sprinkling were used (cf. Acts 8:38-39).

At the moment Jesus came out of the river, **behold, the heavens were opened**. When Ezekiel saw the heavens opened and had the vision of God, he saw such things as the four living creatures, the chariot, and the wheels (Ezek. 1:1-19). Just before he died, Stephen saw “the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56), and John the apostle had several heavenly visions (Rev. 4:1; 11:19; 19:11). Paul’s experience of being “caught up to the third heaven” was so wonderful and amazing as to be “inexpressible” (2 Cor. 12:2-4).

As one commentator suggests, “Just as the veil of the Temple was rent in twain to symbolize the perfect access of all men to God, so here the heavens are rent asunder to show how near God is to Jesus, and Jesus is to God.”

When the heavens opened before John the Baptist, **he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon Him**, just as the Lord had promised (John 1:33). The confirming sign was that of a dove, the only instance in which the Holy Spirit was ever so represented. To the Jewish mind of that day the dove was associated with sacrifice. Bulls were sacrificed by the rich and lambs by the middle class, but most of the people were poor and could only afford a dove.

Why did the Holy Spirit come upon Jesus? When He became a man, Jesus did not lose His divinity. He was still fully God in every way. In His deity He needed nothing. But in His humanity He was here being anointed for service and granted strength for ministry. The Spirit anointed Him for His kingly service, as Isaiah had predicted: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and freedom to prisoners” (Isa. 61:1). Among other things, the Spirit of God came upon Jesus in His humanness in a special way (John 3:34) that empowered Him to cast out demons (Matt. 12:28), to do miraculous signs and wonders (Acts 2:22), and to preach (cf. Acts 10:38). Like every human being, Jesus became tired and hungry and sleepy. His humanness needed strengthening, and that needed strength was given by the Holy Spirit (cf. Matt. 4:1; Luke 4:14).

Jesus' anointing with the Holy Spirit was unique. It was given to empower Him in His humanness, but it was also given as a visible, confirming sign to John the Baptist and to everyone else watching. Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the great King whose coming the Lord had called John to announce and to prepare men for.

Matthew 3:17

Confirmation By The Father

and behold, a voice out of the heavens, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased." (3:17)

All the Trinity participated in Jesus' baptism. The Son had confirmed His own kingship by saying, "It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (v. 15), and the Spirit had confirmed His right of messiahship by resting on Him (v. 16). The final aspect of Jesus' coronation, or commissioning, was the Father's confirming word. For a sacrifice to be acceptable to God it must be pure, spotless, without blemish (Ex. 12:5; Lev. 1:3; Deut. 17:1; etc.). Of this One who willingly identified Himself with sinners by His baptism and who was marked by the Holy Spirit as the dove of sacrifice, the Father now said, **This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.**

No Old Testament sacrifice, no matter how carefully selected, had ever been truly pleasing to God. It was not possible to find an animal that did not have some blemish, some imperfection. Not only that, but the blood of those animals was at best only symbolic, "for it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Heb. 10:4; cf. 9:12). But the sacrifice Jesus would make on the cross would be "with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1:19). Thus God could say He was well-pleased with the perfection of Jesus Christ (cf. Matt. 17:5; John 12:28, where God repeats this superlative commendation).

Beloved (*agape tos*) connotes a deep, rich, and profound relationship. It is used here of the Father's great love for His **Son**, but it is also used elsewhere of His love for believers (Rom. 1:7) and for what believers' love toward each other should be (1 Cor. 4:14). Jesus is the Father's **beloved** above all those He loves, the beloved apart from whom no other could ever be beloved (cf. Eph. 1:6). Only in His **Son** could the Father ever be fully **well-pleased** (*eudokeo*). God had examined, as it were, His **beloved Son**, who would offer Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of those with whom He was willing to identify Himself. No imperfection could be found in Him, and God was delighted.

As believers, we too are a delight to the Father, because we are now in the Son. Because the Father finds no imperfection in His Son, He now by His grace finds no imperfection in those who trust in Him (cf. Rom. 3:26; 5:17, 21; Gal. 2:20; 3:27; Eph. 1:3-6; etc.).

The fact that Jesus Christ is the Son of God is central to the gospel. In no passage is that made more clear than in Hebrews 1:1-8:

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high; having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they. For to which of the angels did He ever say, “Thou art My Son, today I have begotten Thee”? And again, “I will be a Father to Him, and He shall be a Son to Me”? And when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says, “And let all the angels of God worship Him.” And of the angels He says, “Who makes His angels winds, and His ministers a flame of fire.” But of the Son He says, “Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of His kingdom.”

Jesus Christ is the fullest expression of God, superior to and exalted above everything and everyone else. He is the beginning of all things, Creator; the middle of all things, Sustainer and Purifier; and the end of all things, Heir (see also Rom. 11:36; Col. 1:16).

The Son is the manifestation of God, the radiance of God’s personal glory, the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4). In Him all deity dwells (Col. 1:15-19; 2:9). Because of His deity, He is superior to the angels who worship Him. (For a fuller explanation of Jesus’ sonship, see the author’s *Hebrews* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1983], pp. 27-29.)

Even God’s title as Father is a reference to His essential relationship to Jesus Christ. God is presented in the New Testament more as the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 11:27; John 5:17-18; 10:29-33; 14:6-11; 17:1-5; Rom. 15:6; 2 Cor. 1:3; Eph. 1:3, 17; Phil. 2:9-11; 1 Pet. 1:3; 2 John 3) than as the Father of believers (Matt. 6:9).

When Jesus called God “Father” He was not emphasizing primarily submission or generation but sameness of essence—that is, deity. John 5:23 sums it up by demanding “that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father.” No one can worship God unless he worships Him as the God who is one with King Jesus—“the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Matthew 4:1

8

THE CRISIS OF TEMPTATION (4:1-11)

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry. And the tempter came and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.” But He answered and said, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.’” Then the devil took Him into the holy city; and he had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God throw Yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will give His angels charge concerning You’; and ‘On their hands they will bear You up, lest You strike Your foot against a stone.’” Jesus said to him, “On the other hand, it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory; and he said to Him, “All these things will I give You, if You fall down and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Begone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.’” Then the devil left Him; and behold, angels came and began to minister to Him. (4:1-11)

Since the Fall in the Garden of Eden, temptation has been a constant, unrelenting part of human life. Men have tried to avoid and resist it with self-inflicted pain to make themselves uncomfortable and presumably humble, or by isolating themselves from other people and from physical comforts. But no person has ever found a place or a circumstance that can make him safe from temptation.

Throughout the history of the church much has been written and spoken about overcoming temptation. A fifth-century Christian wrote,

Fly from all occasions of temptation, and if still tempted, fly further still. If there is no escape possible, then have done with running away and show a bold face and take the two-edged sword of the Spirit. Some temptations must be taken by the throat as David killed the lion; others must be stifled as David hugged the bear to death. Some you had better keep to yourselves and not give air. Shut them up as a scorpion in a bottle. Scorpions in such confinement die soon, but if allowed out for a crawl and then put back into the bottle and corked down, they will live a long while and give you trouble. Keep the cork on your temptations, and they will die of themselves.

Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-543) sought an increase of grace and exemption from temptation by wearing a rough hair shirt and living for three years in a desolate cave, where his scant food was lowered to him on a cord. Once he threw himself into a clump of thorns and briars until his body was covered with bleeding wounds. But he found no escape from temptation. It followed him wherever he went and in whatever he did.

Others have tried to overcome temptation by, in effect, denying it. Jovinian, a heretical fifth-century monk, taught that after a person was baptized he was forever free of the devil's power and from temptation. Jerome, his most outstanding opponent, wisely commented that baptism does not drown the devil.

In Matthew 4:1-11 one of the most monumental and mysterious spiritual battles of all time is recounted—the personal confrontation between Jesus Christ and Satan. The devil's temptations directed at Jesus in the wilderness of Judea were observed by no other human being. He was entirely alone, and it is therefore obvious that we could know nothing of what transpired there unless Jesus Himself had told His disciples of it. Here He reveals the victory secret, as it were, of His momentous struggle with Satan.

The encounter occurred immediately after Jesus' baptism, which, in the terms of His kingship, represented His coronation, His commissioning. Now, after His proclamation as King comes the test of His kingliness. His baptism in the Jordan declared His royalty; His testing in the wilderness demonstrated it. Here Jesus proved He was worthy to receive and to reign over the kingdom His Father would give Him. The One of whom the Father had just said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased" (3:17), here shows why He was well-pleasing to His Father. He shows that, even in the extreme of temptation, He consistently lived in perfect harmony with the divine plan. Here He first demonstrated His power over hell. His absolute sovereignty forbade Him to bow to the "god of this world," so He faced the full force of Satan's wicked deception, yet remained untouched and uncontaminated. Evil at its lowest was overcome by Him, and goodness at its highest commended Him. The combination of both accredited Him as King.

In this struggle of the Son of God with the son of perdition we are given clear and applicable insights into Satan's strategy against God and His people and also into Christ's way of victory over the tempter. Side by side we are shown the way of danger and the way of escape, the way that leads to defeat and death and the way that leads to victory and life—in short, the way of Satan and the way of God.

It seems that Matthew had two primary purposes in presenting Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. First, as mentioned above, Jesus' victory demonstrated His divine kingship, His royal power to resist the only other great ruler and dominion in the universe, Satan himself. Christ here won His first direct battle with His great enemy, and thereby gave evidence of His glorious right and power as the King of kings and Lord of lords, the supreme Ruler of all creation, the only God. By so doing, He sealed His final victory yet to come. Satan's

purpose in the temptations was, of course, just the opposite: to conquer the newly commissioned King, to overthrow the Messiah, and to claim all His royal rights and prerogatives for himself.

Matthew's other purpose was to demonstrate the pattern found in Jesus' human victory over sin, a pattern that He longs to share with all who belong to Him. When we face testing and temptation in the same way our Lord did, we too can be victorious over the adversary's attempts to corrupt us and to usurp the Lord's rightful place in our lives.

The momentous encounter that Matthew here describes, and from which believers can gain such help and encouragement, may be divided into three parts for study: the preparation, the temptation, and the triumph.

Matthew 4:1

The Preparation

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry, (4:1-2)

We learn from Mark that “immediately the Spirit impelled Him to go out into the wilderness” (Mark 1:12). The “immediately,” of course, is sequential to the baptism. As soon as Jesus' baptism was completed, His forty-day wilderness experience began. Mark's use of *ekballō* (“impelled”) indicates the necessity of Jesus' temptation. Although the temptations were given by Satan, they were a part of God's perfect plan for the redemptive work of His Son.

One of the great truths of life, from which even the Son of God was not exempt on earth, is that after every victory comes temptation. God's Word warns, “Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12). When we have just succeeded in something important, we are invariably tempted to think that we made the accomplishment in our own power and that it is rightfully and permanently ours. When we are most exhilarated with success we are also most vulnerable to pride—and to failure.

In one of my high school football games we were ahead by some fifty points in the fourth quarter, and the coach was letting everyone play. We were on about the five-yard line, and a touchdown was certain. The coach decided to let a fourth-string runningback carry the ball, so that he could have at least one touchdown to his credit before he graduated the next spring. He easily ran through the hole the line opened up for him, and he scored. As the crowd cheered he turned to wave, but kept running. He hit the goal post and was knocked cold. He was so carried away with his triumph that he completely lost his perspective and his sense of reality. Consequently his victory was short-lived.

At other times success causes us to feel invincible and to let down our guard, and when testings come we are not prepared for them. In the contest between

Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, the Lord gave dramatic and miraculous evidence that He was the true God and that Elijah was His true prophet. First He sent fire from heaven to consume the sacrifices and wood that Elijah had soaked with water. Then, in answer to the prophet's prayer, He sent rain to drought-stricken Judah (1 Kings 18:16-46). But within less than a day Elijah was in despair and asked the Lord to take his life. After being courageous and immovable before the 450 false prophets, he shriveled before the threats of Jezebel (19:1-4). From the height of exhilarating victory he quickly fell into deep despair.

No sooner had Israel been delivered from Egypt than Pharaoh came pursuing her with his army. No sooner had Hezekiah left the solemn Passover than Sennacherib came against him. No sooner had Paul received an abundance of revelations than he was assaulted with vile temptations.

And no sooner had Jesus experienced the first great testimony to His ministry than He faced the first great test of His ministry. After being anointed by the Holy Spirit and attested by the Father, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led about by the Spirit in the wilderness" (Luke 4:1). Jesus now was in full consciousness of His divine mission, and His sacred humanity was filled through and through with the abiding presence and power of God. As never before, He was deeply satisfied as He contemplated the redemptive work He was sent to accomplish. After thirty years of waiting in obscurity He now was fully commissioned to begin His task. Then the devil tried to turn Him away.

One of Satan's most common scriptural names is **the devil**, from *diabolos*, which means accuser or slanderer. Among the many other names given him are: the ruler of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), the prince of the power of the air (Eph. 2:2), the god of this world (2 Cor. 4:4), the serpent of old and the deceiver of the whole world (Rev. 12:9), Abaddon and Apollyon, both of which mean "destroyer" (Rev. 9:11), and the tempter, as seen in the next verse of our text (Matt. 4:3; cf. 1 Thess. 3:5).

Many people, including some professing Christians, do not believe in a personal devil. But Satan has never made himself more personally manifest than he did to Jesus in the wilderness. The Lord's own account shows unmistakably that the opponent He faced was personal in every sense. Satan was so real even to Martin Luther that it is reported that on one occasion Luther threw an inkwell at his adversary.

Having been cast out of heaven by the Lord, Satan's full fury has ever since been turned against God and His work. During Jesus' incarnation that wrath was specially focused in all its intensity against the Son and against His divine mission of salvation. The devil's single purpose is to frustrate the plan of God and to usurp the place of God. He therefore continually attacks Christ and all who belong to Him. He also pursues every effort to keep others from coming to Christ.

The wilderness of Judea is a hot, barren, and desolate area that extends west from the Dead Sea almost to Jerusalem, and is some thirty-five miles long and fifteen miles wide. George Adam Smith described it as an area of yellow sand and crumbling limestone. It is an area of contorted strata, where the ridges run in all directions as if they were warped and twisted. The hills are like dust heaps, the limestone is blistered and peeling, the rocks are bare and jagged, and often the ground sounds hollow (cited in William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975] 1:63). Nowhere in Palestine could Jesus have been more isolated or in less comfort.

Satan met Adam in the paradise of Eden, where everything good was provided and nothing harmful existed. Adam lost his battle with Satan while in the perfect situation. The Second Adam met Satan in the desolate, forbidding **wilderness**, where “He was with the wild beasts” (Mark 1:13) and was without food for forty days (Luke 4:2). Yet what the first Adam lost in an ideal environment the Second Adam won back in a terribly imperfect environment. What better proof can there be that spiritual and moral failure are not caused by circumstances but by the character and response of the one who is tempted?

The temptations did not catch God by surprise. Jesus specifically went there **to be tempted by the devil**. The Greek *peirazo* is a morally neutral word that simply means “to test.” Whether the testing is for a good or evil purpose depends on the intent of the one giving the test. When the scriptural context clearly indicates the testing is an enticement to evil, the word is most frequently translated by a form of the English *tempt*, which carries that negative connotation. The fact that **the devil** was here doing the testing clearly indicates that Jesus was being **tempted**, enticed to do evil.

Yet God often uses Satan’s tempting to evil as His own means of testing for good. What Satan intended to lead the Son into sin and disobedience, the Father used to demonstrate the Son’s holiness and worthiness. That is God’s plan for all of His children. Christians cannot be tempted in a way that God cannot use for their good and His glory. James even tells us to “consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials [*peirasmos*], knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2-4). That is God’s plan and purpose—to use Satan’s temptations as a means of testing and strengthening our faith in Him and of our growing stronger in righteousness. God allows testings in our lives in order that our spiritual “muscles” may be exercised and strengthened. Whether the testing is by God’s initiative or is sent by Satan, God will always use it to produce good in us when we meet the test in His power.

God never tests in the sense of enticing to evil. “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust” (James 1:13). All five of the forms of “to tempt” in those verses are from *peirazo*, and all five indicate the negative side of testing, the inducement to evil. God never has a part in that sort of testing, but

He can and will turn even the worst sort of testing into the right sort, when it is surrendered to His will and power. It is God's great desire to turn into victory what Satan intends for failure, to strengthen us at the very point where the adversary wants to find us weak.

Joseph's being sold into slavery by his brothers, along with the false accusations and imprisonment he endured as a slave in Egypt, could easily have driven him to despair and bitterness. Most people, faced with such mistreatment and misfortune, would ask, "Why me, Lord? What have I done to deserve this?" They would seethe over their circumstances and possibly dream of revenge. That, no doubt, was the devil's desire for Joseph, but it was not God's. As Joseph told his brothers many years later, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive" (Gen. 50:20). What Satan and the brothers had intended for evil, God, through Joseph's obedience, turned to good.

Before the three strong temptation efforts were directed to Jesus, **He had fasted forty days and forty nights**. We are not told what He did during that period, but He no doubt spent most of the time communing with His heavenly Father. Between His baptism and the temptations perhaps He needed the special preparation of being entirely alone and undisturbed with His Father. Even in His perfect humanity, Jesus needed time for thought and for prayer, as we all do. Moses spent forty years in Midian being prepared to lead Israel from Egypt to Canaan. Between his conversion and the beginning of his ministry, Paul spent three years of preparation in Nabataen Arabia (Gal. 1:17-18).

It seems a great understatement to say that, after Jesus' long period of fasting, **He became hungry**. Yet Matthew's simple and direct words give strong evidence that the story was not manufactured by the disciples or the early church. The writings of virtually every false religion and cult are characterized by exaggeration and overdramatization of events relating to the lives of its founders and key leaders. By contrast, even the most astounding events in Scripture are reported with restraint and simplicity.

Hunger not only makes us physically weak but also tends to weaken our moral and spiritual resistance as well. When we are tired, hungry, or sick we are usually less concerned about other needs and dangers and tend to be vulnerable to anything that might provide relief from our present distress. Satan therefore usually attacks most fiercely in such times of weakness and unpreparedness. Temptations that have been anticipated, guarded against, and prayed about have little power to harm us. Jesus tells us to "keep watching and praying, that you may not come into temptation" (Mark 14:38). Victory over temptation comes from being constantly prepared for it, which, in turn, comes from constantly relying on the Lord.

It is said that a person traveling in tiger country will not be attacked if he sees the tiger before the tiger sees him. Tigers attack from behind in order to surprise their victims, and therefore one of the best defenses against that vicious animal is to face it.

Jesus, though having fasted for over a month, was no less alert to spiritual danger. Because He had spent the time in communion with His Father, even in His weakest physical moments He did not allow Satan to gain any foothold. The accounts in Mark (1:13) and Luke (4:2) seem to indicate that Jesus was in some way tempted throughout His stay in the wilderness. Possibly it was the devil's strategy to gradually wear the Lord down little by little before confronting Him with the three great temptations that are specifically recorded. But Jesus would not yield to His adversary on even the slightest point.

Matthew 4:3

The Temptation

And the tempter came and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." But He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took Him into the holy city; and he had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God throw Yourself down; for it is written, 'He will give His angels charge concerning You'; and 'On their hands they will bear You up, lest You strike Your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "On the other hand, it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory; and he said to Him, "All these things will I give You, if You fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Begone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.'" (4:3-10)

Satan is here spoken of as **the tempter**, one of his descriptive names and titles in Scripture. We are not told what form the devil may have taken on this occasion, but his confrontation with Jesus was direct and personal. They spoke to each other and even moved about together, first to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem and then to a high mountain.

Satan's first great frontal attack on Jesus Christ as He began His earthly ministry was in the form of three temptations, each designed to weaken and destroy the Messiah in an important area of His mission. The temptations became progressively worse. The first was for Jesus to distrust the providential care of His Father and to use His own divine powers to serve Himself. The second was to presume on the Father's care by putting Him to the test. The third was for Him to renounce the way of His Father and to substitute the way of Satan.

Matthew 4:3

SERVING SELF

And the tempter came and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.” But He answered and said, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.’” (4:3-4)

The devil’s first approach to Jesus had also been his first approach to Eve—to cast doubt on God’s Word. He asked Eve, “Indeed, has God said, ‘You shall not eat from any tree of the garden’?” (Gen. 3:1), causing her to question God’s command. His first word to Jesus was, **If you are the Son of God**—the Greek conditional phrase assumes that Jesus is indeed the divine Son whom the Father had just proclaimed Him to be at His baptism (3:17). Before he gave the direct temptation, Satan gave this one simply to set up the rest. Satan was hoping to persuade Jesus to demonstrate His power to verify that it was real. That would mean violating God’s plan that He set that power aside in humiliation and use it only when the Father willed. Satan wanted Jesus to disobey God. Affirming His deity and rights as the Son of God would have been to act independently of God.

The first direct temptation in the wilderness was for Jesus to act against God’s plan and to **command that these stones become bread**. This temptation involved a great deal more than Jesus’ satisfying His hunger. After forty days and nights of fasting, He certainly was hungry and thirsty, and He had the right to have something to eat and drink. The most obvious part of the temptation was for Jesus to fulfill His legitimate physical needs by miraculous means. But the deeper temptation was Satan’s appeal to Jesus’ supposed rights as the Son of God. “Why,” Satan seemed to say, “should you starve in the wilderness if you are really God’s Son? How could the Father allow His Son to go hungry, when He even provided manna for the rebellious children of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai? And had not Isaiah written of the righteous that ‘His bread will be given him; his water will be sure’” (Isa. 33:16)? You are a man, and you need food to survive. If God had let His people die in the wilderness, how could His plan of redemption have been fulfilled? If He lets you die in this wilderness, how can you fulfill your divine mission on His behalf?

The purpose of the temptation was not simply for Jesus to satisfy His physical hunger, but to suggest that His being hungry was incompatible with His being the Son of God. He was being tempted to doubt the Father’s Word, the Father’s love, and the Father’s provision. He had every right, Satan suggested, to use His own divine powers to supply what the Father had not. The Son of God certainly was too important and dignified to have to endure such hardship and discomfort. He had been born in a stable, had to flee to Egypt for His life, spent thirty years in an obscure family in a obscure village in Galilee, and forty days and nights unattended, unrecognized, and unpitied in the wilderness. Surely that was more than enough ignominy to allow Him to identify with mankind. But now that the Father Himself had publicly declared Him to be His Son, it was time for Jesus to use some of His divine authority for His own personal benefit.

This first temptation in the wilderness implied essentially the same mocking taunt that the crowds made at the crucifixion: “If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross” (Matt. 27:40; cf. vv. 42-43). It also included the wicked attempt to cause the Second Adam to fail where the first Adam had failed—in relation to food. Satan wanted Christ to fail because of bread just as Adam had failed because of fruit. Above all, however, he wanted to solicit the Son’s rebellion against the Father.

But Jesus had come in His incarnation to do the Father’s will and only the Father’s will; indeed His will and the Father’s were exactly the same (John 5:30; cf. 10:30; Heb. 10:9). He testified, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work” (John 4:34), and on another occasion, “For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (John 6:38). In the Garden of Gethsemane, just before His betrayal and arrest, He said, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt,” and a short while later, “My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Thy will be done” (Matt. 26:39, 42).

It was that absolute trust and submission that Satan sought to shatter. To have succeeded would have put an irreparable rift in the Trinity. They would no longer have been Three in One, no longer have been of one mind and purpose. In his incalculable pride and wickedness, Satan tried to fracture the very nature of God Himself.

But Jesus, in His incalculable humility and righteousness, **answered and said, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.’”** All three of Jesus’ responses to the devil were begun with an appeal to God’s Word: **It is written**. Even more than David, He could say, “Thy word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against Thee” (Ps. 119:11). In quoting Deuteronomy 8:3 to Satan, Jesus declared that we are better off to obey and depend on God, waiting on His provision, than to grab satisfaction for ourselves when and as we think we need it. Moses had originally said those words to Israel as he recounted to her the great love and blessing God had bestowed on her during her own wilderness experience (Deut. 8:1-18).

God’s people are never justified in complaining and worrying about their needs. If we live by faith in Him and in obedience to His Word, we will never lack anything we really need. “And my God shall supply all your needs,” Paul assures us, “according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19). Jesus tells us that God knows what we need even before we ask Him (Matt. 6:8). Later in the same discourse He says, “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you” (6:33). We are *always* better off to obey God and to trust in His gracious sustenance than to impatiently and selfishly provide for ourselves in ways that disobey, or in any way compromise, His Word. Underlying our readiness to justify much of what we do is the common but self-centered and carnal notion that, as God’s children, we deserve the earthly best and that it is inappropriate and even unspiritual to be

satisfied with anything less. Grabbing or demanding what we think we deserve may be an act of rebellion against sovereign God.

To try to circumvent or modify God's revealed will not only is unfaithful and fleshly but is based on the false assumption that our physical well-being is our most crucial need, without which we cannot exist. Jesus contradicts that assumption, which is so natural to fallen man. **Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.** "It is not food," Jesus says, "that is the most necessary part of life. The creative, energizing, and sustaining power of God is the only real source of man's existence."

James reminds us that we do not know what we will be able to do in the future, or even if we will have a future in this life. Every person is "just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away," he says. When planning what we want to do, we "ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that'" (James 4:14-15). Like Jesus, the purposes and intentions of our lives should only be the purposes and intentions of our heavenly Father. The guiding principle of His life should be the guiding principle of ours. The central motive of our lives should be to please God and to trust Him to supply everything we need—to follow without reservation Jesus' command to "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness" and to believe without reservation that He will provide everything we need (Matt. 6:33). Before He gave that command, Jesus had asked, "Why are you anxious about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory did not clothe himself like one of these. But if God so arrays the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more do so for you, O men of little faith?" (6:28-30).

We can never please God, or even serve our own best interests, by complaining about and demanding what we do not have, or by violating or ignoring His will in order to get something we want. If we persist in disobeying God He may severely discipline us, or even take us off the scene, as John warns in his first letter (1 John 5:16). Ananias and Sapphira lost their lives because they lied to the Holy Spirit by telling the apostles they had received less than they actually did from the sale of some property (Acts 5:1-11). Certain members of the Corinthian church became weak and sick, and several even died, because they profaned the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:27-30).

Even when our disobedience does not reach such extremes, we always suffer when we willfully bypass God's Word. Following our Lord's example in the wilderness, no matter how urgent and important a need seems to be, we are to wait for our heavenly Father's provision, knowing that expedience and self-effort cannot bring good for ourselves, and certainly not glory to God.

Matthew 4:5

TESTING GOD

Then the devil took Him into the holy city; and he had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God throw Yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will give His angels charge concerning You’; and ‘On their hands they will bear You up, lest You strike Your foot against a stone.’” Jesus said to him, “On the other hand, it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” (4:5-7)

Having failed to induce Jesus to use His divine powers to serve His own self-interests and thereby rebel against the will of His Father, Satan proceeded to tempt the Son to put His heavenly Father’s love and power to a test.

By some means **the devil took Him into the holy city; and he had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple.** The location and form of the **pinnacle of the temple** in Jerusalem has not been identified with certainty. It must have been part of the reconstruction ordered by Herod the Great and most likely was on the eastern side of the Temple, overlooking the Kidron Valley. **The pinnacle** may have been the roof that extended out over Herod’s portico. Josephus reports that the drop to the valley floor was some 450 feet. According to early tradition, James, the head of the Jerusalem church, was martyred by being thrown from that portico.

Still hoping to undermine Jesus’ relation to God in His divine sonship, the devil again introduced his temptation with the words **if You are the Son of God.** “Prove to yourself and to the world that you are the Son of God,” Satan taunted, and **throw Yourself down.**

In the first temptation a need (lack of food) already existed; in the second a need was to be created. To make the temptation more persuasive, the devil quoted Scripture, as Jesus had just done. Quoting Psalm 91:11-12, he said, **for it is written, “He will give His angels charge concerning You”; and “On their hands they will bear You up, lest You strike Your foot against a stone.”**

With that subtle and clever twist, the tempter thought He had backed Jesus into a corner. If Jesus lived only by the Word of God, then He would be confronted by something from the Word of God. “You claim to be God’s Son and You claim to trust His Word,” Satan was saying. “If so, why don’t you demonstrate your sonship and prove the truth of God’s Word by putting Him to a test—a scriptural test? If you won’t use your *own* divine power to help yourself, let your Father use *His* divine power to help you. If you won’t act independently of the Father, let the Father act. Give your Father a chance to fulfill the Scripture I just quoted to you.”

For Jesus to have followed Satan’s suggestion would have been, in the eyes of many Jews, sure proof of His messiahship. According to William Barclay, that is exactly the sort of proof many purported messiahs of that day were trying to give. A man named Theudas led a group of people from the Temple to the Jordan River, promising to split the waters. After he failed, no one listened to him anymore. An Egyptian pretender claimed he would lay flat the walls of

Jerusalem, which, of course, he was not able to do. Tradition holds that Simon the magician (see Acts 8:9) tried the very feat with which Satan tempted Jesus: jumping off the top of the Temple—for which he lost his life as well as his following (*The Gospel of Matthew* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], 1:69).

Sensationalism has always appealed to the flesh, and many people are willing to believe almost anyone or anything as long as the claims are accompanied by fantastic happenings. Jesus warned that “false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect” (Matt. 24:24). But such dramatic signs, even when they are from God, do not produce faith; they only strengthen the faith of those who already believe. The many miracles by which God provided for Israel in the wilderness drove many of the people to presumption and greater disbelief. Jesus’ miracles only hardened the opposition of His enemies. He declared that “an evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign” (Matt. 12:39; cf. 16:4). When Jesus was dedicated in the Temple as an infant, Simeon “said to Mary His mother, ‘Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed’” (Luke 2:34). Jesus Himself was the greatest sign ever given by God to mankind, yet, as Isaiah had predicted hundreds of years earlier, He “was despised and forsaken of men” (Isa. 53:3; Luke 18:31-33).

Those who acclaimed Jesus only because of His miracles and impressive words later turned against Him. When the crowd from Galilee, astounded by Jesus’ multiplying the bread and fish, tried to make Him king, He would have nothing of it (John 6:14-15). Those who scattered their garments before Jesus and waved palm branches in His honor as He came into Jerusalem did so because He had raised Lazarus from the dead (John 12:13, 17-18). A short while later Jesus hid Himself from the Jerusalem crowd, about whom John says, “But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him” (John 12:37). Demanding sensational proof is not evidence of faith but of doubt. To long for the visible sign, the big miracle, the dramatic proof is nothing but masked unbelief. It is the farthest thing from faith.

Jesus would have no part of cheap, faithless sensationalism. He therefore replied to Satan, **It is written, “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.”** For those who believe in God, it is more than evident that He already has proved Himself. Jesus did not need to prove to Himself that His Father cared and protected, and He knew that the Father’s care and protection could not be proved to others by any means but faith.

For at least two reasons Jesus refused to take part in a spectacle such as throwing Himself off the Temple roof. First, any sensationalism inevitably is frustrated by the law of diminishing returns. People are never satisfied. They always want one more sign, one more miracle, one more show. To have maintained His influence over the people by the use of miracles, Jesus would have had to produce greater and greater sensations. Because the natural, carnal heart can never be satisfied, this year’s miracle would have become next year’s bore. His followers would only have been lovers of sensation, not lovers of God.

Second, and more significant, no matter how noble and important we may think our reasons are, to test God is to doubt God. And to doubt God is not to trust Him, and not to trust Him is sin. That, of course, is what Satan wanted Jesus to do. To induce Jesus to sin, if that were possible, would shatter His perfect holiness, and therefore shatter His divinity and man's hope of salvation. Had Jesus put His Father to such a test, He would have separated Himself from His Father and perverted the divine plan of redemption—the very purpose for which He had come to earth.

Not only that, but to have tested the Father by putting Him under pressure to provide by extraordinary means, especially a means of Jesus' own choosing, would have been for the Son to put His judgment and will above the Father's—which He would never do (Matt. 26:39, 42; John 5:30; 6:30; etc.). It would also have questioned the Father's gracious providence and love. How much more should we, mere creatures who are so imperfect, never place our will or judgment above God's. To live recklessly and carelessly, and then expect God to bail us out when we get into trouble, is to presume upon his grace.

Those who willingly put themselves in the way of danger and temptation often end up blaming God when harm comes from their foolishness. When the Lord confronted Adam about his eating the forbidden fruit, Adam's response was to blame God even more than he blamed his wife. "The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate" (Gen. 3:12). It was true that Eve gave Adam the fruit, but because God gave Eve to Adam, the primary blame was God's—according to Adam's perverted logic. Our need is not to prove God's faithfulness but to demonstrate our own, by trusting Him both to determine and to supply our needs according to His own will.

God expects us to take risks, any risks necessary, in order to obey His will. When we risk our prestige, our money, our lives, our families, or anything else to fulfill the Lord's calling, we can rest confidently in His divine provision for all that we need—if we accept the truth that only He knows what our needs really are. But when we take risks simply to fulfill our own ambitions or to put God to the test, He gives no promise on which we can rest.

Matthew 4:8

WORSHIPING SATAN

Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory; and he said to Him, "All these things will I give You, if You fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Begone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.'" (4:8-10)

Satan now drops his pretense and makes one final, desperate effort to corrupt Jesus. He finally reveals his supreme purpose: to induce Jesus Christ to worship him. He had first suggested what Jesus ought to do for Himself. Next he

suggested what the Father ought to do for Jesus. Now he suggests what Satan could do for Jesus—in exchange for what Jesus could do for him.

We are not told what **very high mountain** it was to which **the devil took him**. The significance, however, lies in the fact that this location gave a vast view of the earth. But the view extended far beyond what physical vision could perceive from *any* vantage point, no matter how high. By some supernatural accommodation the devil showed Jesus the glories of Egypt—its pyramids, temples, libraries, and vast treasures. He showed the power and splendor of Rome, with its mighty empire spread over the known world. He showed great Athens, magnificent Corinth, and of course wondrous Jerusalem, the royal city of David, and more—**all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory**.

As God’s own proclaimed King of kings, Jesus had a divine right to all kingdoms, and it was to that right that Satan appealed in this last temptation. “Why should you have to wait for what is already rightfully yours?” he suggested to Jesus. “You deserve to have it now. Why do you submit as a Servant when you could reign as a King? I am only offering you what the Father has already promised.” Perhaps he reminded Jesus that God had said to the Son, “Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Thine inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Thy possession” (Ps. 2:8).

But Satan was offering the world to Jesus on his own corrupt terms, not God’s. That which the Father promised to the Son because of His righteous obedience, Satan offered to the Son in exchange for His unrighteous disobedience. God’s plan in testing the Son was to prove the Son’s worthiness to inherit and rule the world. Satan’s plan was to draw the Son away from that worthiness by enticing Him to grab the kingdom the Father promised to give Him. Instead of enduring the long, bitter, humiliating, and painful road to the cross—and the even longer wait in heaven for God’s time to be completed—Jesus could rule the world now!

Satan always comes at us in that way. He suggests that the world of business, the world of politics, the world of fame, or the world of whatever our heart desires can be ours—if only...! We can get what we want; we can fulfill our lusts and our fantasies; we can *be* somebody. All we must do to get those things of the world is to go after them in the way of the world—which is Satan’s way.

That, in essence, is what the tempter always promises. He promised Eve that by eating the forbidden fruit she would not die as God had warned, but that, in fact, she would become a god herself. “For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God” (Gen. 3:4-5). He tempts each of us in the same way. “Why set your standards so high? What’s the use? You can get what you want by cutting a corner here and shading the truth there. Why wait for heavenly reward, when you can have what you want now?” When we set our hearts on money, prestige, popularity, power, or selfish happiness, we are doing exactly what Satan wanted Jesus to do—put self first and God last. Self-will is Satan’s will and is therefore by definition the opposite of God’s will, which is for us to “seek first His kingdom and His righteousness”

(Matt. 6:33). Abraham sought what God promised in his own self-styled act with Hagar, and tragedy resulted. It always does.

Satan is a counterfeiter. He offers what seems to be the same as what God offers, and his price is much cheaper. “God wants you to prosper, doesn’t He?” Satan asks. “Well, I’ll give you prosperity a lot sooner and for a lot less. Just turn your head a little at questionable practices. Give in when it’s advantageous; don’t be a prude; follow the crowd. That’s the way to success.” The basic argument is always a form of the idea that the end justifies the means.

But Satan is also the father of lies. What he really demanded in the wilderness was Jesus’ own soul: **All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me.** Satan had rebelled against God in the first place because he could not tolerate being second to the Trinity. Here, he thought, was his great opportunity: he would bribe the Son to worship at his feet. Satan’s price is always immeasurably more than he leads us to believe.

And what he gives is always immeasurably less than he promises. For Jesus to have given in to this third temptation would have brought the same ultimate result as His having succumbed to either of the other two. He would have disqualified Himself not only as King but as Savior. The statement of those who mocked at the foot of the cross would have had to have been reversed: “He saved Himself; others He cannot save” (see Matt. 27:42). Instead of redeeming the world He would have joined the world. Instead of inheriting the world, He would have lost the world. The Christ would have played the antichrist, and the Lamb would have become the beast.

As before, Jesus’ reply was from Scripture, and is again from Deuteronomy. **Then Jesus said to him, “Begone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.’”** The tempter’s last proposal was so preposterous that Jesus dismissed him with **Begone, Satan!** The devil had stepped beyond all bounds in proposing such unutterable wickedness. Because Satan’s present power is only by God’s permission, when the Son commanded him to leave, Satan had no choice but to obey. Therein Christ demonstrated the very sovereign power Satan wanted Him to misuse!

If the Son of God would not compromise even the least important truth in the universe, He would surely not compromise the greatest: that God, and God alone, is to be worshiped and served. Jesus had heard enough from the enemy. Though Satan would be back as soon as he had “an opportune time” (Luke 4:13), for now he was forced to leave.

Jesus will inherit the kingdom in God’s time, and we will inherit the kingdom with Him (Matt. 5:5; 25:34; Rom. 8:17; James 2:5). In the eternal, heavenly state all the universe will be ours! Who would want to sacrifice that for the deceptive, disappointing, and short-lived imitations Satan offers?

There are many good things that God will give us even in this life. No one desires our happiness more than our heavenly Father. “If you then, being evil,” Jesus says, “know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall

your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!” (Matt. 7:11). We can have the happiness God gives; why should we settle for the cheap substitute Satan proffers? We can have the success of living righteously and pleasing our heavenly Father; why should we settle for the brief and disappointing successes sin produces? By God’s grace we can have the peace that passes understanding; why should we settle for the cheap satisfactions that everyone understands but that will soon pass?

Matthew 4:11

The Triumph

Then the devil left Him; and behold, angels came and began to minister to Him. (4:11)

When Jesus said, “Begone,” **the devil left Him**, because he had no choice. The Lord gives all of His children the power to resist Satan. “Resist the devil,” James assures us, “and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). As he did with Jesus, Satan will not long stay away from us; but with *every* temptation God “will provide a way of escape” (1 Cor. 10:13). For every temptation Satan leads us into, a way out is provided by the Father.

Satan’s temptations failed, but God’s testings succeeded. Jesus’ responses to the tempter were, in essence, “I will trust the Father; I will not presume on His Word; and I will not circumvent His will. I will take the Father’s good gifts from the Father’s own hand, in the Father’s own way, and in the Father’s own time.” Thus the King was accredited by the severest test.

After Satan left, **angels came**. How much better is the ministry of angels than the deceptions of Satan. At Jesus’ baptism the Father acknowledged Jesus’ worthiness by proclaiming, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.” Now the Father acknowledges Jesus’ worthiness by sending angels **to minister to Him**. At any time during His wilderness experience Jesus could have asked for and received the aid of “more than twelve legions of angels” (Matt. 26:53). But He waited for His Father to send them in His Father’s time.

We are not told what the ministry of the angels included, but surely they brought Jesus food to satisfy His hunger. We know they could not have been in the presence of the Son of God without offering Him worship. And certainly they could not have come from heaven without bringing strengthening words of assurance and love from His Father.

Satan tempts us in the same basic ways he tempted Jesus in the wilderness. First, he will try to get us to distrust God’s providential care and to try to solve our problems, win our struggles, and meet our needs by our own plans and in our own power. Second, he will try to get us to presume on God’s care and forgiveness by willingly putting ourselves in the way of danger—whether physical, economic, moral, spiritual, or any other. Third, he will appeal to selfish

ambitions and try to get us to use our own schemes to fulfill the promises God has made to us—which amounts to trying to fulfill God’s plan in Satan’s way.

Those three ways are reflected in 1 John 2:16—“For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.” The temptation for Jesus to turn stones into bread was to fulfill “the lust of the flesh” by using His divine powers for selfish means. The temptation to throw Himself off the pinnacle of the Temple was to fulfill “the lust of the eyes” by showing off to the world and seeking fame through sensationalism. The temptation to grab immediate control of the kingdoms of the world was to satisfy the “boastful pride of life” by yielding to Satan’s power and will.

The story is told of a man who was trying to teach his dog obedience. He would take a large piece of meat and put it in the middle of the floor. Each time the dog attempted to take the meat the man would swat the dog and say, “No.” Soon the dog began to associate the swatting with the word *no* and learned to stop simply when the word was said. When meat was placed on the floor the dog would not look at it but rather at his master, waiting for his word of approval or denial.

That is essentially the message God teaches in this passage: “When temptation comes, don’t look at the temptation but at Jesus Christ. Keep your eyes on His example and do what he did. Look at the ways He was tempted and at the way He resisted, and learn from Him.” The writer of Hebrews, perhaps with Jesus’ wilderness temptations particularly in mind, tells us, “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). Even more encouraging is the earlier declaration: “For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted” (Heb. 2:18).

Jesus has been there before us; He has met the worst Satan can give and has been victorious. More than that, He is eager to share that victory with His own people when they are tempted. “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:13).

We can have victory over temptation only by resisting in the way that Jesus resisted—by holding with complete obedience to God and His Word. Jesus endured temptation to the very limit of Satan’s power, and He resisted to that very limit. He did not in the least degree allow temptation to develop into desire, much less into sin (cf. James 1:13-15). He did not think the matter over or give it any consideration. He simply stood firmly in His Father’s will and said no!

We find help against temptation, just as we find help for everything else in the Christian life, by “fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith” (Heb. 12:2). A hurdler soon learns that if he looks at the hurdles as he runs, he

will trip and fall. From start to finish he looks only at the goal, and when he does that the hurdles are cleared in stride as each one is encountered. Keeping our eyes on our Lord Jesus Christ is our only hope of conquering temptation and faithfully running “with endurance the race that is set before us” (Heb. 12:1).

Matthew 4:12

9

THE LIGHT DAWNS (4:12-17)

Now when He heard that John had been taken into custody, He withdrew into Galilee; and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. This was to fulfill what was spoken through 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 Gentile—The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light, and to those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a light dawned.”

From that time Jesus began to preach and say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (4:12-17)

One of the most beautiful metaphors used to describe Jesus’ nature and character is that of light. It conveys the idea of the illuminating, truth-revealing, and sin-exposing ministry of the Son of God. After first presenting Jesus Christ as the creative Word of God, John tells us, “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it” (John 1:4-5). He then tells us that John the Baptist “came that he might bear witness of the light... the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man (vv. 8-9). He continues to say that “this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God” (John 3:19-21).

Speaking of Himself, Jesus said, “I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12). Jesus spoke those words “in the treasury, as He taught in the temple” (v. 20). The Temple treasury was the outer court, the court of the women, and Jesus was there at the conclusion of the feast of Tabernacles. At that feast the Jews celebrated what they called the illumination of the Temple. A massive series of candelabra was placed in the middle of the court of the women, and for a week a great stream of light shined out continuously—to commemorate the pillar of fire that led Israel during the wilderness wanderings under Moses. As Jesus entered the

court of the women, the light had just been extinguished. The candelabra were still in place, but they now gave no light. Jesus' declaration that He Himself was the light of the world that would never go out must have struck His hearers with great force.

In the Old Testament, walking in the light was often used as a figure of righteousness and obedience to God, and walking in darkness as a figure of wickedness and disobedience (see Prov. 2:13; 4:18-19; etc.). Now Jesus presents Himself as the embodiment of righteousness and godliness, the very "light of the world." "While I am in the world," He said, "I am the light of the world" (John 9:5), and again, "For a little while longer the light is among you. Walk while you have the light, that darkness may not overtake you" (12:35; cf. v. 46). Paul proclaimed, "For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). Peter speaks of Christians as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9).

After the Fall, mankind had two "candles," as it were, that continued to give light about God and His will—the candle of creation and the candle of conscience. But man paid little attention to either, preferring to walk in the darkness of his own corrupted will (see Rom. 1:18-21). In his sinfulness man continually extinguished the only two lights he had that revealed God's nature and His will for His creatures.

Modern research has shown that, contrary to what had always been assumed, leprosy, now often called Hansen's disease, does not itself cause the decay and deformity so often found in the extremities of its victims. The ulceration and decay are caused by abrasion, infection, external heat, and other secondary causes. The disease itself causes certain parts of the body to become insensitive to pain, and the person therefore has no warning of danger or harm. People with leprosy will therefore often reach into a fire to retrieve something, or will tear their feet to shreds walking on sharp stones they cannot feel.

The disease of sin has a similar effect. It desensitizes man's spiritual and moral nature, destroying even the limited natural protection he has against evil, snuffing out the residual light that remains after the Fall. And Satan endeavors to shut out the light of the saving good news (2 Cor. 4:3-4).

Jesus Christ came not only to make man sensitive again to sin, but to restore the life and health that sin has destroyed. He came not only to reveal the darkness that sin causes, but also to bring the light that overcomes the darkness. That is how Matthew introduces the active ministry of Jesus: He is Himself the great light that has dawned upon mankind. As the aged Simeon said of Jesus as He held the infant Lord in his arms in the Temple, "My eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel" (Luke 2:30-32; cf. Isa. 42:6; 49:6; 52:10).

We learn from the apostle John (1:19—4:42) that about a year elapsed between Jesus' wilderness temptations and the events recorded in Matthew 4:12-17. Probably because it does not relate directly to Jesus' kingship, that period is not mentioned by Matthew

What Jesus did during that time was nevertheless significant. For some three days Jesus had remained near the Jordan where John was baptizing. During that time John gave progressively greater testimony to Jesus' messiahship. The first day he spoke of Jesus as "He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie" (John 1:27). The second day he proclaimed, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (v. 29) and "This is the Son of God" (v. 34). The third day, when John again declared, "Behold, the Lamb of God," the two disciples of John who were with him left to follow Jesus (v. 35-37). In effect, John said, "The Messiah has come," then, "Behold, the Messiah," and finally, "Follow the Messiah." Those two disciples of John, one of whom was Andrew now became the disciples of Jesus (vv. 37-40).

John was a bridge between the Old Testament and the New, and that bridge had now almost completed its service. He himself would soon say of Jesus, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). During that first year of Jesus' ministry, John continued to preach, and their two ministries overlapped. As John's work began to phase out, Jesus' work began to build.

Among the other highlights of that year were Jesus' first miracle at the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11), His cleansing of the Temple (2:12-25), His testimony to Nicodemus (3:1-21), the final public testimony of John the Baptist (3:22-36), and Jesus' ministry in Samaria at Sychar (4:1-42).

In 4:12-17, Matthew picks up the story of that first year where the apostle John leaves off, giving three features of Jesus' early ministry that show God's perfect work through His Son. It was at the right time; it was in the right place; and it was the right proclamation.

Matthew 4:12

The Right Time

Now when He heard that John had been taken into custody, (4:12a)

In Matthew's presentation, Jesus' official ministry began when the herald of the King went to jail. The Son of God always worked on His Father's divine timetable. He had, as it were, a divine clock ticking in His mind and heart that regulated everything He said and did. Paul affirms that "when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son" (Gal. 4:4). Jesus spoke of His hour as not having yet come (John 7:30; 8:20) and then of its having arrived (Matt. 26:45; John 12:23; 17:1).

Jesus chose not to use His supernatural powers to accomplish things that could be accomplished by ordinary human means. He submitted Himself to

human limitations. Although He knew what was in every man's heart (John 2:24-25), He learned of John's imprisonment by common report, just as did everyone else. It was only **when He heard** of John's arrest that He went back to Galilee.

John had been taken into custody by Herod Antipas and thrown into the dungeon at the palace at Machaerus, on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea. John's reproof of Herod for his great wickedness, including the taking of his half-brother Philip's wife, Herodias, for himself (14:3-4; Luke 3:19-20), cost the prophet his freedom and eventually his life. This non-Jewish Idumean was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea and, like his father before him, held office by Rome's appointment. He was one of several sons (by several wives) of Herod the Great who were appointed over parts of the region ruled by their father before his death. Herodias was the woman—vile even by Roman standards—who would induce her daughter, Salome, to trick Herod into serving the head of John the Baptist on a platter before his guests at a royal dinner (14:6-11). The act was so unusually barbaric that even the hardened Herod himself “was distressed” (v. 9, NIV).

It is always dangerous to confront evil, and John's fearless condemnation of moral wickedness in high places led to his being beheaded. With similar bravery John Knox of Scotland stood ground against a corrupt monarchy. Standing before the repressive and corrupt Queen Mary, who had just rebuked him for resisting her authority, he said, “If princes exceed their bounds, madam, they may be resisted and even deposed.”

John the Baptist's imprisonment and death, just as his heralding the King of kings, were in God's divine plan and timetable. The end of the herald's work signaled the beginning of the King's. Herod and Herodias believed they freely controlled their province, and certainly the destiny of the insignificant Jewish preacher who dared condemn them. It is amazing how the proud and arrogant think they act in perfect freedom to accomplish their selfish ends, when in truth their decisions and actions only trigger events that God scheduled before the foundation of the world.

Matthew 4:13

The Right Place

He withdrew into Galilee; and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. This was to fulfill what was spoken through 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 were sitting in darkness saw a great light, and to those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a light dawned.” (4:12b-16)

Nothing is accidental or circumstantial in the Lord's work. Jesus did not go from Judea, through Samaria, and into Galilee because He was forced to do so by Herod or by the Jewish leaders or because He had nowhere else to go. He left Judea because His work there was finished for that period of His ministry. He went through Samaria in order to bring light to the half-Jew half-Gentile Samaritans. He then **withdrew** (*anachō reō*), used often to convey the thought of escaping danger) **into Galilee** because that was the next place where the divine plan scheduled Him to minister. By divine determination Jesus went to the right place at the right time.

When Jesus **withdrew into Galilee** after hearing of John's arrest, it was not out of fear of Herod. He feared no man, and was surely no less brave than John. Had He wanted to escape possible trouble from Herod, He would not have gone to Galilee, because that, too, was under Herod's control.

We again find additional information in John's gospel. "When therefore the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John,... He left Judea, and departed again into Galilee" (John 4:1, 3). Jesus left the lower Jordan region for Galilee because of the Jewish leaders, particularly the Pharisees, and not because of Herod. Though Jesus had not yet begun preaching, His close association with John the Baptist made Him suspect to the Pharisees and Sadducees, whom John had so scathingly rebuked (Matt. 3:7). Those religious leaders had come to hate John, but did not dare take action against him because he was so highly regarded by most of the people. Even several years after John's death they would not speak ill of him for "fear [of] the multitude" (Matt. 21:26). They were therefore greatly pleased when Herod did to John what they themselves wanted, but were afraid, to do. When they learned that Jesus was gaining a larger following even than John, their hatred would soon turn against Him as well. Jesus had no fear of their hatred, but it was not yet time for that hatred to be unleashed against Him.

Jesus was no more afraid of the Pharisees than was John, but He wanted to avoid a premature confrontation. When the time came, Jesus faced the Jewish religious leaders without a wince, and His denunciations of them were longer-lasting and immeasurably harder than those of John the Baptist had been (see, e.g., Matt. 23:1-36). Jesus knew that He was eternally safe from any danger that men could devise. His life would be forfeited, but by His own divine will, not by the wills or power of His enemies (John 10:17-18). And He would live again!

The Roman region of **Galilee** was primarily to the west, but also extended north and south, of the Sea of Galilee—which was really a lake, sometimes called Tiberias (John 6:1) or Gennesaret (Luke 5:1). The region is some 60 miles long, north to south, and about 30 miles wide. The area around the lake was heavily populated (estimated by some to have had as many as two million people in Jesus' day) and had long been the breadbasket of central Palestine. The soil was extremely fertile, and the lake furnished great quantities of edible fish. The Jewish historian Josephus, who at one time was governor of Galilee, said of the area, "It is throughout rich in soil and pasture, producing every variety of tree,

and inviting by its productivity even those who have the least inclination for agriculture. It is everywhere tilled and everywhere productive” (*The Wars of the Jews* 3. 3.2).

The Jews who lived in **Galilee** were less sophisticated and traditional than those in Judea, especially those in the great metropolis of Jerusalem. Josephus observed that Galileans “were fond of innovations and by nature disposed to change, and they delighted in seditions.” They even had a distinct accent in their speech (Matt. 26:73). Perhaps Jesus chose His disciples from that area because they would be less bound to Jewish tradition and more open to the newness of the gospel.

It is evident from the text that Jesus was in **Nazareth** for a while. Luke explains that, after Jesus came from Judea through Samaria, He “returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit,... and He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read” (Luke 4:14, 16). At first “all were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips; and they were saying, ‘Is this not Joseph’s son?’” (v. 22). But after Jesus exposed their true spiritual condition, “all in the synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these things.” They would have thrown Him over a cliff to His death had He not escaped (vv. 23-30).

After Jesus’ hometown rejected Him, just as He had said they would (Luke 4:23-27), **He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali.**

Capernaum means “village of Nahum” and was possibly named for the prophet Nahum. But Nahum means “compassion,” and it may be that the town simply had been named for its compassionate people. By Jesus’ day it was a flourishing, prosperous city. It was here that Matthew had his tax office (Matt. 9:9), and it was this place that Matthew refers to as “His city,” that is, Jesus’ own city (9:1). Yet a short while later Jesus would say of it, “And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You shall descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you” (Matt. 11:23-24). Today **Capernaum**, though a popular attraction for Christian visitors, is virtually uninhabited.

As we learn from Matthew’s quotation of Isaiah 9:1 in verse 15, **the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan**, had long been known as **Galilee of the Gentiles** (*ethnoi*, heathen, or nations). All of Galilee was cosmopolitan, with the Syrians to the north and east and the descendants of the ancient Phoenicians to the west. It was more of a crossroads than Jerusalem, which was isolated from much trade traffic. A famous trade route was actually known as the **way of the sea**. It went through **Galilee** on its way from Damascus to the Mediterranean coast and then down to Egypt. One ancient

writer said that Judea was on the way to nowhere, whereas Galilee was on the way to everywhere. The Galilean Jews' constant association with Gentiles contributed greatly to their nontraditional character

The region of Galilee originally had been given by the Lord to the tribes of Asher, **Zebulun and Naphtali** when Israel began to settle in Canaan (see Josh. 19:10-39). But, contrary to God's command, **Zebulun and Naphtali** failed to expel all of the Canaanites from their territories. From the beginning, therefore, these unfaithful Jews suffered the problem of mixed marriages and the inevitable pagan influence which that practice brought.

In the eighth century B.C. the Assyrians, under Tiglath-pileser, took away a large part of those tribes as captives (2 Kings 15:29) and replaced them with Assyrians and other non-Jews. Until it was temporarily liberated by Judas Maccabaeus in 164 B.C., the region of Galilee was largely under foreign control and was even largely populated by non-Jews. Another Jewish leader, Aristobulus, reconquered Galilee in 104 B.C. and tried unsuccessfully to establish an entirely Jewish nation by forcibly circumcizing all the male inhabitants. Through those disrupting centuries, the Jews that remained in Galilee had been greatly weakened in both biblical and traditional Judaism—giving even greater significance to the name **Galilee of the Gentiles**.

It is not strange, then, that the reaction of many Jews in Jerusalem was, "Surely the Christ is not going to come from Galilee, is He?" (John 7:41). The idea of a Galilean Messiah seemed ludicrous. When Nicodemus tried to convince the Pharisees that Jesus should be given a fair hearing, "They answered and said to him, 'You are not also from Galilee, are you? Search, and see that no prophet arises out of Galilee'" (vv. 51-52).

Yet, as Matthew here reminds his readers, Isaiah had long before prophesied that in **Galilee of the Gentiles—The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light, and to those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a light dawned** (cf. Isa. 9:1-2). The fact alone that Jesus so accurately and completely fulfilled Old Testament prophecy should be enough to convince an honest mind of the Bible's truthfulness and authority. Just as Isaiah had predicted eight centuries earlier, the despised, sin-darkened, and rebellious Galileans were the first to glimpse the Messiah, the first to see the dawning of God's New Covenant! Not mighty and beautiful Jerusalem, the queen city of the Jews, but **Galilee of the Gentiles** would first hear Messiah's message. Not the learned, proud, and pure Jews of Jerusalem, but the mongrel, downcast, nontraditional mixed multitude of Samaria and Galilee had that great honor. To those who were neediest, and who were most likely to recognize their need, Jesus went first.

The fact that Jesus began His ministry in Samaria and Galilee, rather than in Jerusalem and Judea, emphasizes the fact that His gospel of salvation was for the whole world. It was the fulfillment of Old Testament truth, which God had chosen to reveal through the Jews (cf. Rom. 3:1-2), but it was in no way an accommodation to the traditional, proud, and exclusive Judaism that had

developed during the intertestamental period and that was so dominant in Jesus' day. The Son of God was sent to be "a light of revelation of the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel" (Luke 2:32; cf. Isa. 42:6; 49:6; 52:10). It was no coincidence of history that "the light of the world" (John 8:12) first proclaimed Himself in **Galilee of the Gentiles**.

It was in and around Galilee that Jesus had spent all but a small part of His childhood and early manhood, and it was there that His ministry first developed and began to spread. As the new day of the gospel dawned, the first rays of light shined in **Galilee**. Into this land of oppression, dispersion, and corrosive moral and spiritual influences—and impending death at the word of divine judgment—Jesus came with words and deeds of mercy, truth, love, and hope: "**To those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a light dawned.**"

Matthew 4:17

The Right Proclamation

From that time Jesus began to preach and say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (4:17)

Preaching was a central part of Jesus' ministry and remains a central part of the ministry of His church. **From that time**, when He went to Galilee, **Jesus began to preach**. *Ke russo* (**to preach**) means "to proclaim" or "to publish," that is, to publicly make a message known. R. C. H. Lenski comments, "The point to be noted is that to preach is not to argue, reason, dispute, or convince by intellectual proof, against all of which a keen intellect may bring counterargument. We simply state in public or testify to all men the truth which God bids us state. No argument can assail the truth presented in this announcement or testimony. Men either believe the truth, as all sane men should, or refuse to believe it, as only fools venture to do" (*The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1964], p. 168).

Jesus preached His message with certainty. He did not come to dispute or to argue, but to proclaim, **to preach**. Preaching is the proclamation of certainties, not the suggestion of possibilities. Jesus also preached "as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Matt. 7:29). What He proclaimed not only was certain but was of the utmost authority. The scribes could not teach authoritatively because they had so mingled biblical truth with the interpretations and traditions of various rabbis that all certainty and authority had long vanished. They could no longer distinguish God's Word from men's words, and all that remained were opinions and speculations. For God's people once again to hear someone preach as the prophets had preached was astonishing (cf. Matt. 7:28-29).

Jesus not only preached with certainty and authority but preached only what He was commissioned by His Father to preach. John the Baptist said of Jesus, "For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God" (John 3:34). Jesus

Himself said, “I speak the things which I have seen with My Father” (John 8:38). Later he gave the same testimony even more pointedly: “For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me commandment, what to say, and what to speak” (John 12:49).

In His high priestly prayer Jesus spoke to His Father of His disciples, saying, “Now they have come to know that everything Thou hast given Me is from Thee; for the words which Thou gavest Me I have given to them; and they received them” (John 17:7-8). And it is in His own authority that Jesus sends out His ministers to the world: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations” (Matt. 28:18-19). That is God’s commission to everyone who preaches in His name. The faithful preacher and teacher will proclaim God’s certain truth, with God’s delegated authority, and under God’s divine commission.

When the King’s light dawned, the message that His light brought was clear. He began where His herald, John the Baptist, had begun: **Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand** (cf. 3:2).

The darkness in which the people lived was the darkness of sin and evil. Jesus was saying, “The great darkness has been upon you because of the great darkness that is within you. You must be willing to turn from that darkness before the light can shine in you.” To turn from sin is to **repent**, to change one’s orientation, to turn around and seek a new way. *Metanoeo* literally means a change of perception, a change in the way we see something. To **repent**, therefore, is to change the way a person looks at sin and the way he looks at righteousness. It involves a change of opinion, of direction, of life itself. To repent is to have a radical change of heart and will—and, consequently, of behavior (cf. Matt. 3:8).

That was, and has always continued to be, the first demand of the gospel, the first requirement of salvation, and the first element of the saving work of the Spirit in the soul. The conclusion of Peter’s Pentecost sermon was a call to repentance: “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). Many years later Paul reminded Timothy that repentance leads “to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 2:25).

Israel would not be ready for or worthy of the King until she repented. Repentance, of course, had always been in order and had always been needed, but now that the **kingdom of heaven [was] at hand**, it was all the more imperative. The King had arrived, and the kingdom was near. Messiah’s time had come—to usher in the age of righteousness and rest, to subdue Israel’s enemies, to bring all of God’s people back to their land, and to reign on the throne of David.

Tragically, because most of Israel did not repent and did not recognize and accept the King, the promised earthly kingdom had to be postponed. As Matthew later explains, the literal, physical kingdom was set aside for a period of time. The spiritual kingdom presently exists only in the hearts of those who have

trusted in Jesus Christ, the King. He is not ruling the nation Israel and the world as He one day will, but He rules the lives of those who belong to Him by faith. The world does not have peace, but those do who know the Prince of Peace. The external kingdom has not yet come, yet the King Himself indwells those that are His. The Messiah, the Christ, now rules in those who have received Him who is “the light of men.”

Matthew 4:18

10

FISHING FOR MEN (4:18-22)

And walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon who was called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. And He said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” And they immediately left the nets, and followed Him. And 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 they immediately left the boat and their father, and followed Him. (4:18-22)

The following widely told story is a sobering parable of what the church’s concern for evangelism has often been like.

On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks were frequent, a crude little life-saving station was built. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted crewmen kept a constant watch over the sea. With no thought for themselves, they went out day or night, tirelessly searching for any who might need help. Many lives were saved by their devoted efforts. After a while the station became famous. Some of those who were saved, as well as others in the surrounding area, wanted to become a part of the work. They gave time and money for its support. New boats were bought, additional crews were trained, and the station grew. Some of the members became unhappy that the building was so crude. They felt a larger, nicer place would be more appropriate as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. So they replaced the emergency cots with hospital beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building. Soon the station became a popular gathering place for its members to discuss the work and to visit with each other. They continued to remodel and decorate until the station more and more took on the look and character of a club. Fewer members were interested in going out on lifesaving missions, so they hired professional crews to do the work on their behalf. The lifesaving motif still prevailed on the club emblems and stationery, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where the club held its initiations. One day a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in many boatloads of cold, wet, half-drowned people. They

were dirty, bruised, and sick; and some had black or yellow skin. The beautiful new club was terribly messed up, and so the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside, where the shipwreck victims could be cleaned up before coming inside. At the next meeting there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities altogether, as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted on keeping lifesaving as their primary purpose and pointed out that, after all, they were still called a lifesaving station. But those members were voted down and told that if they wanted to save lives they could begin their own station down the coast somewhere. As the years went by, the new station gradually faced the same problems the other one had experienced. It, too, became a club, and its lifesaving work became less and less of a priority. The few members who remained dedicated to lifesaving began another station. History continued to repeat itself; and if you visit that coast today you will find a number of exclusive clubs along the shore. Shipwrecks are still frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.

What a striking illustration of the history of the church. Yet the work of evangelism, of spiritual lifesaving, is nonetheless the purest, truest, noblest, and most essential work the church will ever do. The work of fishing men and women out of the sea of sin, the work of rescuing people from the breakers of hell, is the greatest work the church is called by God to do.

Rescuing men from sin is God's great concern. Evangelism has been called the sob of God. Concern for the lost caused Jesus to grieve over unbelieving Jerusalem: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling" (Matt. 23:37).

God sent His Son to earth—to preach, die, and be raised—for the very purpose of saving men from sin. The Father "so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him" (John 3:16-17). The Son Himself came "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). The Holy Spirit gives to those who believe "the washing of regeneration and renewing" (Titus 3:5). The whole Trinity is at work in the ministry of saving mankind from sin. Evangelism is the great concern of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

God's concern for redeeming mankind did not, of course, begin when He sent His Son to earth. In the Garden of Eden He promised that one day sin would be destroyed, that Satan's very head would be bruised (Gen. 3:15). In His covenant with Abraham He promised that in him "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). In the covenant at Sinai God called Israel to "be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6), a kingdom of His witnesses to the world to draw all mankind to Himself.

God's people were to share His concern for the lost. Moses was so desperate for the salvation of his own rebellious people that he cried to God, "But now, if

Thou wilt, forgive their sin—and if not, please blot me out from Thy book which Thou hast written!” (Ex. 32:32). The writer of Proverbs reminded Israel that “he who is wise wins souls” (Prov. 11:30). The Lord told Daniel, “Those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever” (Dan. 12:3).

Evangelism was the great concern of the New Testament church. Immediately after Pentecost, the new believers were totally dedicated to God and to winning others to Him. As they studied at the apostles’ feet, shared with each other, and praised God, they came to have “favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42-47). When the first great persecution of the church in Jerusalem began under the direction of Saul, “those who had been scattered went about preaching the word” (Acts 8:1-4). They did not despair over their hardship but took it as an opportunity to expand the Lord’s work.

After Saul himself was converted, his own great concern was evangelism—for building up the movement he had formerly tried to destroy “I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish,” he would one day write. “Thus, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:14-16). Though he was called to be God’s special apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; Eph. 3:8), Paul had such an overwhelming desire for the salvation of his fellow Jews that he said, “I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Rom. 9:3). His “heart’s desire and [his] prayer to God for them [was] for their salvation” (10:1). He wanted everyone to be saved, and was willing to “become all things to all men, that [he might] by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22).

Evangelism has been the heartthrob of faithful Christians throughout the history of the church. John Knox pleaded with God, “Give me Scotland or I die.” John Wesley considered the whole world his parish.

Like the Christian life in general, soul-winning involves a paradox. Jesus said, “For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it” (Matt. 16:25). In other words, in saving others we lose ourselves; in losing ourselves in the task we will be used to win others. Jesus warned His disciples that the Jewish leaders would soon “make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God” (John 16:2)—just as they hated Jesus Himself “without a cause” (15:25). Those who would reach the world must be willing to be rejected by the world, just as our Lord conquered death by yielding to death.

In a sense, the life of evangelism involves sacrificing the greater for the lesser, the worthy for the unworthy. It is the opposite of the loveless and brutal survival of the fittest—the way of the fallen, sinful world. God’s way, the way of redemption, is that of the strong being willing to die that the weak might live. God’s Word is clear that, if we are committed to the salvation of those without

Jesus Christ, we will lose ourselves in order to reach them. Preaching the saving gospel is essential, and so is personal witnessing.

Forms of *evangelize* are used over fifty times in the New Testament. Evangelization is the primary thrust of the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations” (Matt. 28:19). To make disciples is to evangelize, to bring men and women under the Saviorhood and lordship of Jesus Christ. When Jesus called His disciples to Himself, He also called them to call others.

By comparing the gospel accounts we discover that there were at least five different phases of Jesus’ calling of the twelve. Each gospel writer emphasized those phases which best suited his particular purpose. As would be expected, the first call was to salvation, to faith in the Messiah (see John 1:35-51; 2:11). The calling that Matthew mentions here was the second calling, the calling to witness. After neither the first nor the second call did the disciples permanently leave their occupations. At the time of the third call (Luke 5:1-11), Peter, James, and John were again back fishing. Jesus repeated the call to be fishers of men, and the disciples then realized the call was permanent and “they *left everything* and followed Him” (v. 11).

In Luke’s account, Simon and the others are still fishermen, and the Lord is teaching the crowd on shore from Simon’s boat (v. 3). After the teaching, He instructed the disciples to go out to the deep water and let down their nets for a catch. Simon protested that a full night of fishing had yielded nothing, but said that he would obey nonetheless. When the fish came into the net to the point of breaking it, and the catch filled both boats so that they almost sank with the weight of the fish, Simon knew who Jesus was—the presence of the holy God. His reaction, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (v. 8), reveals the same attitude Isaiah had when he saw God (Isa. 6:1-5)—an overwhelming sense of sinfulness. The sinner in the presence of God sees only his sin, and shrinks back in fear of judgment. But instead of consuming fire, Peter received a call to discipleship and evangelism. When the call came he responded with the other three men in total commitment to follow the Lord.

Mark tells us of the fourth level, or phase, of the call. “And He went up to the mountain and summoned those whom He Himself wanted, and they came to Him. And He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him, and that He might send them out to preach, and to have authority to cast out the demons” (Mark 3:13-15). The fifth phase, anticipated in the previous one, is recorded in Matthew 10:1—“And having summoned His twelve disciples, He gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness.”

God calls all believers in a similar way. First He calls us to salvation, apart from which no other call could be effective. He then calls us progressively to more specific and ever-expanding service.

Matthew 4:18

Calling Peter and Andrew

And walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon who was called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. And He said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” And they immediately left the nets, and followed Him. (4:18-20)

The Sea of Galilee is an oval-shaped body of water about eight miles wide and thirteen miles long, and is nearly 700 feet below sea level. Luke, who was well traveled, always referred to it more properly as a lake. Yet Josephus reports that in the first century A.D. some 240 boats regularly fished the waters of that lake. Much additional fishing was done along the shore, as **Simon who was called Peter** [see Matt. 16:16-18], **and Andrew his brother** were doing on this occasion, **casting a net into the sea.**

In that day, three methods of fishing were used. One was by hook and line, the second was by a throw net cast from the shallow water along the shore, and the third was by a large dragnet strung between two or more boats in the deep water. **Peter and Andrew** were here obviously using the second method. That **net** was probably about nine feet in diameter, and the two brothers were skilled in its use, **for they were fishermen by trade.** The Greek term for that particular net was *amphiblestron* (related to our *amphibious*, an adjective describing something related to both land and water) —so named because the person using the net would stand on or near shore and throw the net into the deeper water where the fish were.

When Jesus called those first disciples, He gathered together the first fish-catching crew of His church. They were the first of the original band of evangelists He called to fulfill the Great Commission. They were Jesus' first partners in ministry. He had the power and the right to accomplish the work of proclaiming the gospel by Himself. But that was not His plan. He could have done it alone, but He never intended to do it alone. From the beginning of His ministry, His plan was to use disciples to win disciples. He would command His disciples to do other things, but His first call to them was, **Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.**

We are given specific details of the callings of only seven of the original twelve. But Jesus individually selected those who would become part of the first marvelous ministry of winning people to Himself. “He called His disciples to Him; and chose twelve of them, whom He also named as apostles” (Luke 6:13). God always chooses His partners. He chose Noah and Abraham, Moses and David. He chose the prophets. He chose Israel herself to be a whole nation of partners, “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). Jesus told His disciples, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you

should go and bear fruit” (John 15:16; cf. 6:70; 13:18). Paul called Epaenetus “the first convert [lit., “firstfruit,” *aparche*] to Christ from Asia” (Rom. 16:5).

That calling to bear fruit in evangelism is extended to everyone who belongs to Jesus Christ. The called ones are themselves to become callers. Speaking of all Christians, Peter wrote, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). Christ mandates that all of His followers be **fishermen**. The command, **Follow Me** (in the Greek an adverb of place expressing a command), literally means “come here.” The term *after* is used in the original to show the place they are to come:

“Your place is following after Me!”

The disciples’ obedience was instant: **And they immediately left the nets, and followed Him**. The sovereign authority of the Lord had spoken. **Followed** is from *akoloutheo* ; which conveys the idea of following as a disciple who is committed to imitating the one he follows.

Many years ago an Italian recluse was found dead in his house. He had lived frugally all his life, but when friends were going through his house to sort out the few possessions he had accumulated they discovered 246 expensive violins crammed into his attic. Some even more valuable ones were in a bureau drawer in his bedroom. Virtually all of his money had been spent buying violins. Yet his misdirected devotion to the instruments had robbed the world of their beautiful sounds. Because he selfishly treasured those violins, the world never heard the music they were meant to play. It is even reported that the first violin the great Stradivarius ever made was not played until it was 147 years old!

Many Christians treat their faith like that man treated his violins. They hide their light; they squirrel away their great treasure. By not sharing their light and their treasure, many to whom they could have witnessed are left in spiritual darkness and poverty.

Some researchers estimate that as many as ninety-five percent of all Christians have never led another person to Jesus Christ. If that is true, ninety-five percent of the world’s spiritual violins have never been played! True love of our riches in Christ leads us to shine and share, not to hide and hoard.

When D. L. Moody once visited an art gallery in Chicago he was especially impressed by a painting called “The Rock of Ages” The picture showed a person with both hands clinging to a cross firmly embedded in a rock. While the stormy sea smashed against the rock, he hung tightly to the cross. Years later Mr. Moody saw a similar picture. This one also showed a person in a storm holding to a cross, but with one hand he was reaching out to someone who was about to drown. The great evangelist commented that, though the first painting was beautiful, the second was even lovelier.

Matthew 4:21

Calling James and John

And 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 they immediately left the boat and their father, and followed Him. (4:21-22)

When Jesus called **James** and **John** they were tough, crusty outdoors-men—uncut jewels. They were **in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets**, a routine but important task in the fishing business. They had already been called to faith in the Savior (see John 1:35-51; 2:11); here **He called them** to the work of evangelism alongside Himself. And they **immediately left the boat and their father, and followed Him**.

These disciples had little education, little spiritual perception, and possibly little religious training of any sort. As their new Master began to teach them, even when He spoke in parables, they often lacked full comprehension of His meaning.

They were often self-centered and inhospitable. When the multitude who had walked a long way around the Sea of Galilee to be with Jesus became hungry, the disciples thought only of sending them away on their own to find food (Matt. 14:15). When some little children were brought to Jesus for blessing, the disciples rebuked those who brought them (19:13). Peter thought he would be extremely generous to forgive someone “up to seven times” (18:21). Even on the night of Jesus’ betrayal, as their Lord agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter, James, and John could not stay awake with Him (26:40, 45). The disciples were selfish, proud, weak, and cowardly. They showed little potential even for dependability, much less for greatness. Yet Jesus chose them for disciples, even to be His inner circle of twelve. They were raw material that He would make into useful instruments.

All the disciples were probably not as rough and unpromising as the first and most dominant four Jesus called, but not one was chosen from among the Jewish religious leaders—the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, priests, or rabbis. It was no doubt partly that fact that caused those leaders to reject Jesus. They could not believe that anyone who Himself was not an official leader, and who chose no official leaders to be His personal students and co-workers, could possibly be the Messiah. It was beyond their comprehension that God’s own Son would bypass the proper leaders of His chosen people when He came to establish His kingdom.

The only apostle who had been a Jewish religious leader was not among the original twelve, and he considered himself “one untimely born.” He knew that his own calling was exceptional and reflected God’s exceeding grace (1 Cor. 15:8-10). He reminded the Corinthian believers, “For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and

God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God” (1 Cor. 1:26-29).

Jesus did not simply command His disciples to become **fishers of men**, but promised that He would **make** them fishermen for men’s souls. As He later would make clear on more than one occasion, that promise was also a caution. Not only was He willing to make them into disciplers, but they could never be effective disciplers—or effective disciples in any way—without His power. “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

A number of qualities that make a good fisherman can also help make a good evangelist. First, a fisherman needs to be patient, because he knows that it often takes time to find a school of fish. Fishermen learn to wait. Second, a fisherman must have perseverance. It is not simply a matter of waiting patiently in one place, hoping some fish will eventually show up. It is a matter of going from place to place, and sometimes back again, over and over—until the fish are found. Third, fishermen must have good instinct for going to the right place and dropping the net at the right moment. Poor timing has lost many a catch, both of fish and of men. A fourth quality is courage. Commercial fishermen, certainly ones such as those on the Sea of Galilee, frequently face considerable danger from storms and various mishaps.

A good fisherman also keeps himself out of sight as much as possible. It is very easy for ourselves to get in the way of our witnessing, causing people to turn away. A good soul-winner keeps himself out of the picture as much as possible.

When Jesus called the disciples to commit themselves to evangelism, He also committed Himself to train them and empower them. Following the Lord’s example, the church not only must call its members to evangelize, but must continually train and encourage them in that calling. The Lord not only empowers his disciples to witness but empowers them to train others to witness. In other words, He empowers His disciples to disciple, just as He promised in the Great Commission. “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations” (Matt. 28:18-19).

Jesus first sent the disciples out two-by-two on brief missions, instructing them about what they should and should not do and say (Mark 6:7-11). After three years of teaching and training in short-term assignments, He finally left them permanently on their own. Yet they were not on their own, because He would henceforth not only be with them but in them (Matt. 28:20; John 16:13-15).

Both in Jesus’ teaching and in His example we can see principles that every soul-winner must emulate. First of all, Jesus was available. It seems incredible that the Son of God, who had so very little time to teach and train the slow-learning disciples, would be so open to those who came to Him for comfort or

healing. He never turned down a request for help.

Second, Jesus showed no favoritism. The poor and outcast could approach Him as easily as the wealthy and powerful. The influential Jairus and the powerful Roman centurion had no advantage over the Samaritan woman of Sychar or the woman taken in adultery.

Third, Jesus was totally sensitive to the needs of those around Him. He always recognized an open heart, a repentant sinner. Even when the crowd pressed around Him, He noticed the woman who touched the hem of His garment. “Jesus turning and seeing her said, ‘Daughter, take courage; your faith has made you well.’ And at once the woman was made well” (Matt. 9:20-22). When we are sensitive to Christ’s Spirit, He will make us sensitive to others, and will lead us to them or them to us.

Fourth, Jesus usually secured a public profession or testimony. Sometimes He gave specific instruction, as He did to the man He delivered from demons (Mark 5:19), whereas at other times the desire to witness was spontaneous, as with the woman of Sychar (John 4:28-29).

Fifth, Jesus showed love and tenderness to those He sought to win. Again His experience with the woman at Sychar gives a beautiful example. She not only was a religious outcast in the eyes of Jews but was an adulteress. She had had five husbands and was then living with a man to whom she was not married. Yet Jesus firmly but gently led her to the place of faith. Through her, many other Samaritans were led to salvation (John 4:7-42).

Finally, Jesus always took time. In contrast to many of His followers, Jesus always had time for others. Some Christian workers are so busy with “the Lord’s work” that they have no time for others—though that was a primary characteristic of Jesus’ own ministry. Even while on His way to heal Jairus’ daughter, Jesus took time to heal the woman who had suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years (Mark 5:21-34).

The response of Peter, Andrew, James, and John to Jesus’ call was the same. **They immediately left** what they were doing **and followed Him**. Their obedience was instant and without hesitation. At this time they had little knowledge of Jesus’ teaching or of what following Him would cost. But it was enough for them to know who He was and that His call to them was a divine call.

From many subsequent accounts in the gospels we know that none of the disciples at this time had a passion for souls, or a passion for any part of the Lord’s work. In fact, their response to unbelief was to call for instant divine destruction (see Luke 9:51-56). Passion came only after understanding and obedience. They developed compassion, humility, understanding, patience, and love as they learned from and obeyed Jesus. Obedience is the spark that lights the fire of passion. The way to develop a love for souls is to obey Jesus’ call to win souls. As we do that, God will kindle that spark of obedience into a great flame of passion. This is the time of gracious evangelism, not of consuming judgment, as our Lord made clear in the parable of the tares (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43).

David Brainerd, the great missionary to the American Indians, who died while still in his twenties, said, “Oh, that I were a flame of fire in my Master’s cause.” His selfless obedience proved the sincerity of that desire, and God gave him a burning heart for lost souls that has few parallels in the history of the church. Henry Martyn, missionary to India and Persia, prayed that he might “burn out for God,” and that is what God graciously allowed him to do.

Such burning desire comes only from the pilot light of obedience. Like David Brainerd, Robert Murray McCheyne died before he was thirty. Of him Courtland Myers wrote: “Everywhere he stepped Scotland shook. Whenever he opened his mouth a spiritual force swept in every direction. Thousands followed him to the feet of Christ.” Visitors who came to see the church where McCheyne had preached were shown a table, chair, and open Bible. They were then told how that man of God spent hours with his head buried in the Bible, weeping for those to whom he would preach. Myers then comments, “With such a passion for souls, is it any wonder that the Holy Spirit gave McCheyne a magnetic personality which drew so many to the Savior?”

The hymn “Let the Lower Lights Be Burning” is based on a story told by D. L. Moody. A ship was coming into Cleveland harbor on Lake Erie on a stormy night. The harbor had two sets of lights to guide incoming vessels. One set was high on the bluff above the harbor and could be seen for many miles. The other set was down near the coastline and was used to guide the ships through the rocks as they came nearer to port. On that particular night the wind and rain had extinguished the lower lights, and the pilot suggested they stay out in the lake until daylight. The captain, however, was afraid of the ship’s being destroyed by the storm and decided to risk making the harbor. But without the lower lights to guide it, the ship was wrecked on the rocks, and many of the men drowned. In applying that story to Christian witnessing, Moody said, “The upper lights in heaven are burning as brightly as ever they’ve burned. But what about the lower lights?”

Matthew 4:23

11

THE KING’S DIVINE CREDENTIALS (4:23-25)

And Jesus was going about in all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. And the news about Him went out into all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, taken with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them. And great multitudes followed Him from Galilee and Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan. (4:23-25)

One of the ways in which Jesus demonstrated His divine character and power was through miracles of healing, which served as messianic credentials. John was especially concerned with those credentials, and his gospel features them. He makes it clear that “many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:30-31). Matthew also confirms that through His mighty works Jesus presented Himself as the Messiah, the great coming King.

The primary purpose of all four gospel writers was to present Jesus as being more than a man. He was the very Son of God. Apart from that central truth everything else about Him would be of little consequence. It would be of absolutely *no* consequence as far as salvation is concerned. But in light of that truth, *everything* about Him is of supreme significance. What He said was the Word of God, and what He did was the work of God.

He who believes in Me does not believe in Me, but in Him who sent Me. And he who beholds Me beholds the One who sent Me. I have come as light into the world, that everyone who believes in Me may not remain in darkness. And if anyone hears My sayings, and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. He who rejects Me, and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day. For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me commandment, what to say, and what to speak. And I know that His commandment is eternal life; therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told Me. (John 12:44-50)

Jesus’ claims were so astounding that His enemies desperately suggested that He must be demon-possessed or insane. But others were wiser, “saying, ‘These are not the sayings of one demon-possessed. A demon cannot open the eyes of the blind, can he?’” (John 10:19-21). The man healed of blindness told the disbelieving Pharisees, “Well, here is an amazing thing, that you do not know where He is from, and yet He opened my eyes. We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing, and does His will, He hears him. Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, He could do nothing” (9:30-33). Jesus’ amazing words were backed up by His amazing works.

On another occasion the officers of the chief priests and Pharisees reported, “Never did a man speak the way this man speaks” (John 7:46). At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, “the multitudes were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt. 7:28-29).

The words Jesus said were also overpowering marks of His messiahship and His majesty.

Matthew focuses both on Jesus' words and His works as, in 4:23-25, he introduces His ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing. He has already demonstrated that Jesus came at the right time and place and with the right message (4:12-17), and that for His work He chose the right partners (vv. 18-22). Now he shows that He came with the right plan—to establish His deity by His words and His works.

Matthew 4:23

Teaching

And Jesus was going about in all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues
(4:23a)

Was going about (from *periago*) is in the imperfect tense, indicating repeated and continuous action. This verse summarizes Jesus' entire Galilean ministry. His going **about in all Galilee** is given in detail in chapters 5-9. His words are the subject of chapters 5-7 (the Sermon on the Mount), and His works are the focus of chapters 8-9.

Matthew does not imply that Jesus visited every village in **Galilee**, but emphasizes that He ministered throughout the region. Because the entire region was only some sixty by thirty miles, and Jesus moved about in it, anyone interested in seeing and hearing Him would not have had far to travel. In the time that He had, He ministered to as many people as He possibly could.

Though that vicinity had long been known as “Galilee of the Gentiles” (see 4:15; Isa. 9:1), Jesus' ministry there apparently concentrated in the Jewish **synagogues**. The synagogue is believed to have developed during the Babylonian exile, and its use was greatly expanded during the intertestamental period. By New Testament times it had become the most important institution in Jewish life. Although the Temple remained by far the holiest shrine of Judaism, many Jews lived thousand of miles from Jerusalem and could never expect to visit there. But synagogues could be established anywhere in Israel or beyond, and around them virtually all Jewish religious and social life centered.

The synagogue not only was the primary place of worship but also of study, community fellowship, and of legal activity. The greatest tragedy for most Jews was to be disfellowshipped from the synagogue, to be unsynagogued (*aposunago gos*, John 12:43). That is what happened to Jews who became Christians. It was such a terrible prospect that, as we assume from the repeated warnings of the book of Hebrews (6:4-6; 10:35-39; etc.), many Jews who recognized the truth of the gospel refused to become Christians because of the certainty of being ostracized from the Jewish community.

Most synagogues were built on a hill, often on the highest point of a town.

Many had a tall pole jutting into the sky, much like a church steeple, making them stand out and be easy to find. Frequently they were built on banks of rivers, sometimes—as the one whose ruins are a popular attraction in modern Capernaum—without a roof.

Worship was held every Sabbath, which began at sundown on Friday and ended at sundown on Saturday. The Jews had special services on the second and fifth days of every week and observed the festivals prescribed in the law as well as numerous others that had developed by tradition. During the Sabbath services, sections of the Torah (law) and the prophets were read. That was followed by various prayers, singing, and responses. Then a text of Scripture would be expounded, possibly following the pattern begun by Ezra after the return from Babylon (see Neh. 8:1-8). Often visiting dignitaries or rabbis would be given the honor of expounding the Scripture, a practice of which both Jesus and Paul took advantage on numerous occasions (see Luke 4:16-17; Acts 13:15-16).

The affairs of the average village synagogue were usually administered by ten elders of the congregation, of whom three were called rulers. The rulers decided whether or not to admit a proselyte into fellowship and settled disputes of all sorts. A fourth ruler, called the angel, served as chairman of the synagogue. Some of the elders functioned as servers, carrying out the decisions of the four rulers. One elder interpreted the ancient Hebrew into the vernacular, one headed the theological school, which every synagogue had, and one served as a popular instructor, teaching on a level that the average member could understand.

During Roman rule the synagogue officials had the power to settle virtually every legal dispute within their congregations and even to inflict punishment, with the one exception of execution. That is why the Jewish leaders needed Pilate's permission to crucify Jesus. Even the Sanhedrin, the supreme council of Jerusalem, had no such right.

The synagogue served as public school for boys, where they studied the Talmud and learned to read, write, and do basic arithmetic. For men, the synagogue was a place of advanced theological study.

The **synagogues of Galilee** provided Jesus with His first platforms for **teaching**. In almost every community of any size He would have found a synagogue, and in the early part of His ministry He was welcomed in most of them. As a visiting rabbi He was often asked to read and expound Scripture, as He readily did (see Luke 4:16-21).

It was in the synagogues that believing, sincere Israelites would be found. Here, if anywhere, Jesus could expect to find those who would hear and accept His divine message. Here is where God's faithful remnant came to worship God and to be taught His Word.

Teaching is from *didasko*, from which we get didactic and which refers to the passing on of information—often, but not necessarily, in a formal setting. It focused on content, with the purpose of discovering the truth—contrary to the forums so popular among Greeks, where discussion and the bantering about of

various ideas and opinions was the primary concern (see Acts 17:21). Synagogue teaching, as illustrated by that of Jesus, was basically expository. Scripture was read and explained section by section, often verse by verse.

Preaching

and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom (4:23b)

Proclaiming is from a term (*ke russo*) often translated “to preach.” The root idea is to herald, or cry out. Whereas *didasko* relates to explaining a message, *ke russo* relates simply to announcing it. While interpreting the Old Testament in His teaching He also was **proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom**, announcing the fact that God’s long-promised Messiah and King had come to establish His **kingdom**. He continued and extended the heralding that John the Baptist had begun.

That which is proclaimed is the *ke rugma* (Matt. 12:41; Rom. 16:25; Titus 1:3; etc.), and that which is taught is the *didache* (Matt. 7:28; Rom. 16:17; etc.). The message proclaimed needs to be explained, and vice versa.

Gospel means “good news,” and it was the good news that the **kingdom** was coming that Jesus preached throughout Galilee. That was the supreme truth, the great good news, around which all of His teaching centered. From His baptism to His ascension Jesus preached the kingdom. “Until the day when He was taken up,” Luke tells us, Jesus was “speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:2-3). He never allowed Himself to get sidetracked into economics, social issues, politics, or personal disputes. His teaching and preaching focused entirely on expounding God’s Word and proclaiming God’s kingdom—a sound pattern for every faithful messenger of the gospel.

John the Baptist heralded the kingdom, but not **the gospel of the kingdom**. Good news as such was not the primary feature in his preaching. His preaching called men to repent of their sins and to prepare themselves for the coming of the King (3:1-10). He focused on sin and judgment. His was the bad news that pointed up the graciousness of the good news about to come. When Jesus’ ministry was more and more resisted by the Jewish leaders, His preaching became more and more stern, even sterner than that of John the Baptist. As hypocrisy became more evident and hostility became more vehement, Jesus’ words became more harsh.

But the King’s first proclamation was of good news, God’s marvelous offer to deliver “us from the domain of darkness, and [to transfer] us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13-14). The **gospel** is the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ, the good news that God’s **kingdom** (the sphere of God’s rule by the grace of salvation) is open to anyone who puts his trust in the King.

The Jews were then under the rule of Rome, and before that they had been under the Greeks, the Medes and Persians, and the Babylonians. Even when they had their own kingdom and their own kings, their condition was far from ideal. Because they were not satisfied to have the Lord as their King, they insisted on having human kings, like all the other nations (1 Sam. 12:12). But those kings brought little peace, prosperity, or happiness, and much sorrow tragedy, and corruption.

When Jesus preached and taught, He was announcing that He was the King who had come to bring God's promised perfect kingdom. Had they accepted the One who now proclaimed the good news of the kingdom to them, the Jews could have had that kingdom established in their midst. Had they accepted Jesus as the Messiah, His kingdom then would have come on earth. But because they rejected the King and His **gospel**, they rejected the earthly, promised **kingdom**.

Jesus spoke powerful words, eternal words, words like no man before had ever spoken. Even the people in His hometown of Nazareth "were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips" (Luke 4:22). When He went down to Capernaum, "they were amazed at His teaching, for His message was with authority" (v. 32). Jesus' cleverest enemies could never trap Him in His words, or confuse Him or confound Him or find any error in what He said. His teaching and His preaching about the kingdom were the divine credentials of His words.

Matthew 4:24

Healing

and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. And the news about Him went out into all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, taken with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them. And great multitudes followed Him from Galilee and Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan. (4:23c-25)

Some people are sick and unhealthy because of their own foolish habits, whereas others suffer as a direct consequence of their sin. God sometimes uses physical affliction to discipline His people. Many of the Corinthian Christians were weak, sick, and had even died because they profaned the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:30). Ananias and Sapphira lost their lives for lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-10). Yet Scripture makes it equally clear that all suffering and disease are not caused by sin, ignorance, errors in judgment, or God's discipline. Job suffered greatly, though he was blameless, upright, feared God, and turned away from evil (Job 1:1). When Jesus' disciples assumed that the man who was born blind was being punished either for his own sin or that of his parents, Jesus corrected them. "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was in order that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:1-3).

Jesus' **healing** was a divine verification. His words should have been sufficient evidence of His messiahship, as they were for those who truly believed. The disciples left everything to follow Jesus before He performed a miracle of any sort. Many heard Him and believed in Him who had no need of healing for themselves or for their family or friends. It is possible that many who heard and believed in Christ never saw Him perform a miracle—just as many believed John the Baptist's message, although "John performed no sign" (John 10:41).

Yet Jesus' healing ministry was a powerful addition to the evidence of His teaching and preaching. Alexander Maclaren said, "It may be doubted whether we have an adequate notion of the immense number of Christ's miracles. Those recorded are but a small portion of those done. Those early ones were illustrations of the nature of His kingdom; they were His first gifts to His kingdom subjects." The writer of Hebrews says of the gospel of the kingdom that "after it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will" (Heb. 2:3-4). Like Jesus' words, the miracles were a foretaste of His glorious, earthly kingdom. To get some idea of what the millennial kingdom will be like we need only multiply His words and His miracles ten-thousandfold.

Jesus healed **every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people**. This universal character of the healings is expanded and illustrated in the following verse: **And the news about Him went out into all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, taken with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them.**

In Jesus' day **Syria** was a Roman province that took in all of Palestine, including Galilee. In the context of this verse, however, it may refer only to the northern part, of which Damascus was the major city. In any case, the point is that Jesus' fame spread well beyond the area in which He was ministering. From a wide surrounding area the people **brought to Him all who were ill**, in hope that He would heal them.

Until modern times, with our great advances in sanitary and medical knowledge, disease was frequently rampant. Plagues stopped only when they had run their natural course, leaving behind countless dead and many others who were disfigured or crippled. Simple infections often became life-threatening. It is not strange, therefore, that news of a healer who could cure any affliction spread like wildfire.

As representative of the **various diseases and pains**, Matthew mentions three specific types that Jesus healed. **Diseases** signifies the many maladies, whereas **pains** refers to the many symptoms.

The first type of malady was that suffered by **demoniacs**, those whose afflictions were caused by demons. It is clear from Scripture, especially the New Testament, that many physical and mental afflictions are caused directly by Satan through the operation of his demons. Chapters 9, 12, and 17 of Matthew and

chapters 9 of Mark and 13 of Luke give abundant evidence of demon-related afflictions. The ability to cast out demons is often referred to as the gift of miracles (literally, “powers”; 1 Cor. 12:10, 28-29), the divine power given specifically to combat the demonic powers of darkness (see Luke 9:1; 10:17-19; Acts 8:6-7; cf. Eph. 6:12).

The second group that Jesus healed were **epileptics**. The King James renders the original (*sele niazō*) as “lunatic,” which, like the Greek, literally means “moonstruck.” In many cultures the mentally ill and those who have convulsions or seizures have been thought to be under the influence of the moon. From other biblical references, such as Matthew 17:15, as well as from descriptions of the affliction in other ancient literature, it is almost certain that the disease was epilepsy, which involves disorder of the central nervous system.

The third group were the **paralytics**, a general term representing a wide range of crippling handicaps. The three terms Matthew uses characterize the three broad areas of man’s afflictions—the spiritual, the mental/nervous, and the physical. Jesus was able to overpower whatever evil afflicted those who came to Him. The earthly aspect of His kingdom will have no place for anything harmful, anything wicked, anything less than perfect wholeness and perfect goodness. “On that day the deaf shall hear, . . . the eyes of the blind shall see. The afflicted also shall increase their gladness in the Lord, and the needy of mankind shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel” (Isa. 29:18-19; cf. 11:6-9). **They brought to Him all who were ill, . . . and He healed them.**

The great reformed theologian B. B. Warfield said, “When our Lord came down to earth He drew heaven with Him. The signs which accompanied His ministry were but the trailing clouds of glory which He brought from heaven, which is His home. The number of the miracles which He wrought may easily be underrated. It has been said that in effect He banished disease and death from Palestine for the three years of His ministry. One touch of the hem of His garment that He wore could heal whole countries of their pain. One touch of His hand could restore life.”

Jesus’ miracles accomplished four things above and beyond the immediate and obvious benefit to those who were healed. First, they proved that He was divine, because no mere human being could do such things. “Believe Me that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me,” Jesus told Philip; “otherwise believe on account of the works themselves” (John 14:11).

Second, the wondrous healings showed that God is compassionate toward those who suffer.

Third, the miracles showed that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah, because the Old Testament predicted that the Messiah would perform miracles. When John the Baptist was imprisoned and began to have doubts about Jesus’ messiahship, Jesus told John’s disciples, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to

them” (Matt. 11:4-5). That Jesus did these things predicted of the Messiah (see Isaiah 35:5-10; 61:1-3; etc.) proved His messiahship.

Fourth, the miracles proved that the coming kingdom was a reality, the wonders and signs being a foretaste of the marvelous realm God has in store for those who are His. “And Jesus was going about all the cities and the villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of sickness” (Matt. 9:35). A short while later Jesus committed the same message and accompanying powers to His disciples: “And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons; freely you received, freely give” (Matt. 10:7-8). A while after that, He pointedly told the unbelieving Pharisees, “If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (12:28).

I am convinced that the only time such miracles will again be performed is just before the millennial kingdom arrives, when the Lord regathers Israel and the tribulation begins. Then, just as at Christ’s (Messiah’s) first coming, “the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb will shout for joy” (Isa. 35:5-6). When Israel rejected the King at His first coming she also rejected the kingdom. But when the King comes again, the coming of His kingdom will not depend on men’s response. He *will* establish it then. It will be announced “among the nations, ‘The Lord reigns; indeed, the world is firmly established, it will not be moved’” (Ps. 96:10).

To demonstrate the absoluteness of His power and authority, Jesus **healed** everyone who came to Him during His earthly ministry, without exception and without limit. He still has power to heal today, with the same absoluteness and completeness; and, as He sovereignly chooses, He does so. But He does not promise to heal everyone who now asks Him, not even those who belong to Him. The healing miracles He performed while on earth, like His other miracles and those of the apostles, were temporary authenticating signs to Israel that her Messiah had come. The Scripture now stands to attest to the promise of a coming earthly kingdom.

Six features of Jesus’ healing have never been duplicated since New Testament times. First, Jesus healed directly, with a word or a touch, without prayer and sometimes even without being near the afflicted person. Second, Jesus healed instantaneously. There was no waiting for restoration to come in stages. Third, He healed completely, never partially. Fourth, He healed everyone who came to Him, everyone who was brought to Him, and everyone for whom healing was asked by another. He healed without discrimination as to person or affliction. Fifth, Jesus healed organic and congenital problems, no matter how severe or longstanding. Sixth, He brought people back to life. He healed even after disease had run its full course and taken the life of its victim.

Those six features also characterized the healing ministry of the apostles. At the beginning of the book of Acts we are told of many miracles and signs that the

apostles performed. Yet before the end of the book the accounts of miracles cease. The same diminishing is seen in the epistles. In his early ministry Paul performed many miracles of healing, but years later he simply advised Timothy to take some wine for his stomach ailment (1 Tim. 5:23). At the end of his next letter to Timothy the apostle reports that “Trophimus I left sick at Miletus” (2 Tim. 4:20), apparently beyond the power of Paul to help. There is no scriptural evidence that, by the end of the apostolic age, miracles of any sort were still performed. Once Israel had turned her back on her Messiah, her divine King, the authenticating signs of the kingdom had no more purpose. They faded and then disappeared altogether.

The **great multitudes** who **followed Him** no doubt came for many reasons besides healing for themselves or others. Many came primarily to hear Him teach and preach, and many no doubt came out of mere curiosity. But they came in great numbers and from great distances. **Decapolis** was a region composed of ten major cities (hence the name, which literally means “ten cities”) located east and south of **Galilee**. **Beyond the Jordan** probably referred to areas such as Perea, which was south of **Decapolis** and east of **Jerusalem and Judea**.

Many of that great multitude believed in Jesus and were saved, experiencing the kingdom inwardly, the rule of God through the grace of salvation. The vast majority, however, Jew and Gentile alike, did not believe in Him. They listened to what He said, watched what He did, and received temporary blessings. But they did not accept the One who spoke and who healed, whose words and works not only give blessing but eternal life.