

## SPECIAL STUDY:

## HOW DOES MATTHEW USE THE PROPHECIES?

Under this innocent title lies a very vital question which touches not only the veracity of an apostle, but also the question of his inspiration, and, consequently, the question of inspiration in general, and the acceptability of the NT books as an authoritative, normative collection of historic documents as a basis of Christian faith. These statements are characteristic of the problems touched by this question:

1. What becomes of Matthew's supposed reliability as an eye-witness of the events he records, if he unblushingly uses as a prophecy about Jesus just any OT text which can be made verbally to fit, even though the ancient text originally had nothing to do with Matthew's material, and was never meant to have anything to do with it? If he unconscionably misappropriates texts in the revered prophets to bolster his case, perhaps he invents facts to support it as well. If an apostle be shown to be intellectually dishonest at this point, who could trust him to tell the truth about the resurrection of Jesus?
2. Perhaps the so-called "fulfillments" of prophecy are merely convenient interpretations of then present circumstances in order to support the pretences to Messiahship made by Jesus of Nazareth, who in reality had no right to that grand title and deserved to be crucified for his blasphemous assertions of Messiahship. (Cf. Lk. 4:16-29)
3. Are there more ways than one in which the word "fulfill" may be understood, so that both the veracity and inspiration of Matthew may stand, thus indicating something of the authority of an apostle's declaration that "this was done with the result that it fulfilled the word of the Lord spoken by the prophet"?

A proper understanding of this third problem will help solve the other two. For, if it be possible to ascertain the intended meaning of Matthew behind the word "fulfilled" in each case of its use, it will lead to a clearer answer to the question of Matthew's use or supposed misuse of a given prophecy. In attacks upon Matthew's integrity, the assumption is generally made that he used the word "fulfilled" in an exact, fixed sense in every instance, somewhat along the lines of this definition: "The fulfillment of any prophecy must conform in every

respect to the details of the supposed prediction." But does our author so intend his word in every case? What is the evidence?

Two particular observations should be made at the outset regarding Matthew's use of the word "fulfill:"

A. *Matthew never precisely defines "fulfill"* in such a way as to require a precise, literal fulfillment of a prophet's words in every case. Rather, he uses the word in its popular sense in a manner suited to each specific prophecy in question, leaving to his reader to decide in each case what is meant by the term. Had Matthew limited himself by so precise a definition as would require a point-by-point fulfillment, the reader would not have this liberty of interpretation according to the requirements of each case, and Matthew would then be chargeable with flagrant manipulation of OT texts.

B. It must be noted that the word "*fulfill*" is used in popular speech, both among the Jews and their writings as well as in modern English, to mean not only "point-by-point identification" but also the more general "*realization or more complete manifestation of a design, plan or intention.*" To force one specific meaning arbitrarily upon Matthew's word would violate the most basic rule of interpretation of human writings: the only correct interpretation of an author is that which he intended to say by the words he used. If the author does not declare his intended meaning for specific words he uses, the only recourse is to the general use of the word among his contemporaries. The word "fulfill" is used in the Scriptures and in other writings in the following senses:

1. A fulfillment is said to occur when a thing predicted clearly comes to pass as predicted. Or, it may be that there was a partial, literal fulfillment in the days of the prophet which leaves the remainder of the prophet's words for later fulfillment. This is the way Matthew (1:22, 23) makes use of Isaiah 7:14, since the promise of a virgin-born Son who would be called Immanuel is not at all fulfilled in Isaiah's day, although other parts of the prophecy were certainly fulfilled, as a sign to king Ahaz. Here, then, Matthew uses "fulfill" in its strictest sense. In 2:4-6, where the prophecy of Micah 5:2 is quoted by the Jewish authorities as the literally-predicted birthplace of the Christ, Matthew tacitly accepts the traditional reading of this passage with almost verbal insistence upon its strict, literal fulfillment. (cf. 2:1)

2. It is well-known that a writer sometimes speaks more than he or his age can comprehend. Should it be thought strange that God should make his prophet the partially unconscious agent for the expression of a great truth the implications of which might be hidden to the prophet himself or to his age? Depths of meaning, hidden both from the original writer or from his earlier interpreters, may be disclosed only by later historical developments. Such is the case with Matthew's treatment of the prophecy of Hosea (11:1). Hosea's words, taken at face value, amount up to the nation of Israel only. However, God's intention, voiced through Hosea's words and seen through the perspective of the history of Israel which focuses itself upon Jesus, was to bring His Son out of Egypt. From the naturalistic viewpoint, we would say that Matthew read history more accurately than all his contemporaries, since he had already seen in Jesus the fulfillment of all of Israel's prophecies. Accordingly, the personal exodus of Jesus from Egypt merely facilitated the true deduction that God, speaking through Hosea, really intended Jesus. On the other hand, speaking from the point of view that for good and sufficient reasons accepts the supernatural inspiration of Matthew, one could say that God inspired Matthew to reveal his correct interpretation of Israel's history, and thus also of Hosea's words regarding that history. Thus, Matthew is revealing the real meaning that God intended behind Hosea's words. Edersheim (*Life*, I, 215) comments:

In point of fact the ancient Synagogue *did* actually apply to the Messiah Ex. iv. 22, on which the words of Hosea are based. See the Midrash on Ps. ii. 7. The quotation is given in full in our remarks on Ps. ii. 7 in Appendix IX.

3. In describing the broken-hearted mothers of Bethlehem, Matthew (2:17, 18) chose rather to use the touchingly beautiful symbol used by Jeremiah (31:15) of the weeping Rachel. Here Matthew uses the word "fulfilled" in a clearly figurative sense, since the fulfillment was not of a prediction of the prophet, but of certain of his words due to their aptness to describe a different situation. There is no predictive element in Jeremiah's words except the promise of Israel's return from captivity, which is not used by Matthew.

Once again the voice of weeping motherhood is heard in Israel. The tender and beautiful imagery is applicable in this sense and is used with true insight, but with no intention of trying to justify a claim of prediction and fulfillment in the literal sense.

4. Frequently, the apostles speak of Jesus as not only fulfilling specific predictions but also fulfilling the very trend or message of the prophets. (See Jn. 1:45; 6:45; Ac. 3:18, 24; 10:43; 13:40; Ro. 1:2) It is in this general sense that Matthew describes Jesus in 2:23 as fulfilling the prophets by His being called a "Nazarene." Thus, Matthew uses "fulfill" literally, although the prediction to which he refers is found in no one prophet, but in the general trend of the prophets who describe the Messiah as "God's Suffering Servant." (Cf. Lk. 24:44ff)
5. There is a fifth use of prophecy and fulfillment that indicates how "fulfillment" may be intended: language is said to be fulfilled when, though it was used to express one event, it may be used to express another. Sayings, fables, parables and other such figures, drawn from a particular event, may have "fulfillment" in another event similar to the case from which they were originally taken. For example, Jesus asserts (Mt. 13:14) that in the unbelief of the people of His day the prophecy of Isaiah 6:9, 10 is fulfilled. While the words of Isaiah were not predictive, they are susceptible of repeated application or realization, because of the general principle they contain. They applied to the prophet's own day. They also apply, and in that sense are fulfilled, to Jesus' own day. By a legitimate extension of meaning, they apply to the stubborn unbelief of any age.

Therefore, we should stand as warned against a too-rigid and literal interpretation of any formula implying fulfillment. While it may certainly be intended to imply literal prediction and an equally literal fulfillment, it may also be intended to suggest nothing more than a harmony of principle. Since our author does not define which of these intentions he is using in each case, we are not at liberty to assert dogmatically a meaning that manifestly does not permit to Matthew the same liberty accorded to other writers in their use of words.

A major difficulty is seen in Matthew's use of a formula which implies fulfillment: "thus it was done to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by the prophet." This formula is his consistent expression both for a literally predicted fulfillment and a figurative, general fulfillment of some figure of speech or of a principle. However, Matthew's Gospel, directed as it was to one segment of a popular, oriental mind of his period, must not be charged with inaccuracy or misappropriation of prophetic texts by those of a critical, western mentality fond of mechanical precisions. If it be objected that Matthew's formula is a loose use of language, let it be answered that Matthew is in good company and that such an objection ignores the cultural background within which the Evangelist wrote. (Cf. Mk. 14:49; Jn. 12:38; 13:18; 15:25; 17:12; 18:32; 19:24, 28, 36)

Are the fulfillments of prophecy merely convenient interpretations of co-incidental circumstances made to support Jesus' pretensions?

"In the one point where the identification of Jesus with the Messiah by His followers can be tested most severely, they are most completely triumphant. It would be comparatively easy to invent incidents suggested by OT prophecies, and to take dignities and titles wholesale from the same source—but given all these, to find one capable of realizing and fulfilling the expectations so aroused is the chief problem. Here fabrication is impossible. And here too the NT meets and answers the challenge of truth." (ISBE, 2518b)

The anti-supernaturalist might ask, "But can it be said that the apostles, who were for the most part no scholars, could more correctly interpret the OT, better even than their own religious leaders? It is not likely that fishermen understood the prophets better than the Sanhedrin and the rabbis who gave their time to nothing but the study of the Law and the prophets." To this it may be replied, yes, but such simple men had not all the prejudices of rabbinical learning to forget as they studied under Jesus, although they admittedly had their own rabbinically-oriented prejudices. (Cf. Mt. 15:12ff; 16:5-12, 21-23) According to Jesus, almost all of the Jews had either ignored the spirit of the Law or misinterpreted the prophets (Mt. 5:17-48; 9:10-13; 11:12; 15:1-20; 22:15—23:39; Jn. 5:38-40, 46, 47; 7:19-24; 12:34), and consequently were not expecting the kind of Messiah that God actually had sent in the person of Jesus. Those fishermen and tax-collectors, who accepted Jesus' authority on the basis of His proof

of identity as the Revealer of God, were indeed better interpreters of the OT than the rabbis, because they had sat under Him who was the Author of that testament! (I Pe. 1:10-12) They had heard His expositions of those prophetic passages (Lk. 24:25-27, 44-48), and, were they to be considered from a mere naturalistic viewpoint, they would still be better qualified to interpret the Scriptures than any rabbi! But their source of authority is always Jesus. Back of the question of the authority and supernatural inspiration of the apostles always stands the more basic demand: What do you think of Jesus? If He be the Revealer of God, then, the interpretations of the OT He teaches the apostles to declare to the world are the only correct, possible interpretations. If Jesus fulfilled His promise to empower them to reveal truth as yet unknown to them, then, the apostles may be trusted when they declare with all the authority of God: "This was done with the result that it fulfilled the word of the Lord spoken by the prophet."

The same Spirit which foretold through the lips of the prophet now interprets the fulfillment, using the pen of the Apostle. Are we at liberty to differ with the conclusions of an Apostle?

## CHAPTER THREE

### Section 5

## THE PREACHING OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

(Parallels: Mark 1:1-8; Luke 3:1-18)

TEXT: 3:1-12

1. And in those days cometh John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, saying,
2. Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.
3. For this is he that was spoken of through Isaiah the prophet, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make ye ready the way of the Lord, Make his paths straight.
4. Now John himself had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his food was locusts and wild honey.
5. Then went out unto him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about the Jordan;
6. and they were baptized of him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.
7. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said unto them, Ye offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?
8. Bring forth therefore fruit worthy of repentance:
9. and think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.
10. And even now the axe lieth at the root of the trees: every tree therefore that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.
11. I indeed baptize you in water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you in the Holy Spirit and *in* fire:
12. whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly cleanse his threshing-floor; and he will gather his wheat into the garner, but the chaff he will burn up with unquenchable fire.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why did John locate his ministry in the wilderness? Why not go where the people live?

- b. How does this ministry of John prepare "the way of the Lord"?
- c. Why do you think John preached the way he did? Dressed the way he did?
- d. What is the difference or similarity between John's baptism and the baptism which Christ commanded His apostles to perform after the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost? (Ac. 2)
- e. Why do you think John spoke so disrespectfully to the "reverend doctors of the Law"? Because he used such harsh language, is he not partly to blame for their rejection of him and consequently "the counsel of God" (Lk. 7:30), or not?
- f. Did the earthly ministry of Jesus fulfill John's predictions made in this section?
- g. What is the meaning of the following allusions:
  - (1) "Make ye ready the way of the Lord; make straight paths"?
  - (2) "Offspring of vipers"?
  - (3) "The axe lies at the root of the trees: every tree therefore that brings not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire"?
  - (4) "His fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly cleanse His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the garner, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire"?
- h. Did John expect the people to show the genuineness of their repentance before he would baptize them, or did he expect such fruits of repentance to be seen in their lives after baptism as the natural result of their repentance?
- i. What is the demonstration in your life that you too have genuinely repented?
- j. If it be wrong for Paul to "speak evil of a ruler of the people" (Ac. 23:5; Ex. 22:28), why is it not wrong for John the Baptist to do the same? Or do circumstances alter cases? Paul's high priest was just as wicked as these Pharisees and Sadducees, and his judgment just as righteous as John's, but what makes the difference?

## PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod Antipas being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Herod Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, there was a man sent from God



whose name was John. He came for testimony to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. The word of God came to this John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit."

In those days John "the baptizer" went throughout all the region about the Jordan where it flows through the wilderness of Judea, preaching an immersion of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, saying, "Repent! The kingdom of heaven has come!"

This is he of whom Malachi the prophet spoke (3:1), "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who shall prepare your way." Also in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet (40:3ff), it says:

The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight!

Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall  
be brought low,

The crooked shall be made straight,

The rough ways shall be made smooth,

And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

John's clothing was a rough coat of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist. His food was a diet of dried locusts and wild honey. The people of Jerusalem and of all Judaea and the Jordan district flocked to him and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them and to the multitudes, "You sons of snakes! Who has stirred you to seek refuge from the coming judgment and God's wrath? Let your life prove your repentance! Show that your hearts are really changed! And do not even begin to presume that you can simply say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor,' for God can raise up descendents from Abraham, even if He has to use these very stones to do it! Already God's axe of judgment stands ready to sever the tap root of the Jewish nation. Every individual Jew who does not bear fruit to the honor of God's mercy will serve as fuel to the honor of His justice!"

The people cried out, "What are we to do?"

He replied, "The man with two coats must share with him who has none, and anyone who has food, let him do likewise."

Among those who came to be immersed were some tax-collectors, who also inquired, "Teacher, what are we to do?"

"Exact no more than the assessment!"

Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?"

"No bullying, no false accusations! Make do with your pay!"

As the people in expectation, questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he might himself be the Messiah, John spoke out, answering their expectations, "I immerse you in water for repentance. There is One who is mightier than I, who is coming after me. I am neither fit to unfasten nor carry His sandals. Yes, I have submerged you in water; but he will immerse you in the Holy Spirit and fire! It is His ministry which will prove the worth of the people. He will separate those of real worth to Him from the worthless: He will take the former home with Him but destroy the others as by inextinguishable fire."

So, exhorting with many other words, he preached good news to the people.

## SUMMARY

The prophetically promised precursor of the Christ, John the Baptist, preached repentance, confession of sin, baptism for the remission of sins, in view of the coming Messiah's kingdom. Thundering God's judgment upon an unrepentant nation, he promised the glories of the messianic kingdom to those who prepared their hearts for the Christ's arrival.

## NOTES

### I. THE MISSION OF THE MAN

**3:1 In those days.** See PARAPHRASE/HARMONY for Luke's precise statement as to what days are meant. Some have mistakenly regarded Matthew as supposing by these words that John's ministry began during the time contemporaneous with the events narrated in his second chapter immediately preceding this. By this expression Matthew does not mean the return to Nazareth, which took place about 28 years before, although he could refer to the whole time Jesus dwelt at Nazareth, and may well indicate "in that age" or "in that era," thus contrasting the era when John began his ministry with the later period when Matthew wrote his Gospel. Therefore, according to Luke's notations, John came preaching in the period from 26-29 A.D.

The fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar (14-37 A.D.) alone, is 29 A.D., or 26 A.D. if Luke is reckoning from his co-regency with Augustus. Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea from 26-36 A.D. Herod was tetrarch of Galilee from 4 B.C. to 34 A.D. The high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, counting the actual influence of Annas after he was deposed until the end of the high-priesthood of Caiaphas, lasted from 6 to 36 A.D.

**John the Baptist.** Beyond this text may be known the following facts about him:

1. He was born under most unusual circumstances (Lk. 1:5-25, 57-80).
2. He was kin to Jesus (Lk. 1:36).
3. His message and baptism possessed the full divine authority (Mt. 21:25, 26, 32; Mk. 11:30-32; Lk. 3:2; 7:29, 30; Jn. 1:6), although his baptism possessed temporary validity (Ac. 18:24-26; 19:1-7).
4. John came to bear witness to the Christ, introducing Him to the Jewish nation (Jn. 1:6-8, 15, 19-36; 5:33-36).
5. He also baptized in Aenon near Salim (Jn. 3:23).
6. He and his disciples fasted (Mt. 9:14; 11:18; Mk. 2:18; Lk. 7:33).
7. He taught his disciples to pray (Lk. 11:1).
8. John was completely self-effacing (Jn. 3:25-30).
9. He was the great "Elijah" promised (Mal. 4:5; Mt. 11:14; 17:10-13; Lk. 1:17), who was to come to turn many of the children of Israel unto the Lord their God.
10. He was the last of the greatest prophets (Mt. 11:11, 13). The common people wondered if he might not be the Messiah (Lk. 3:15). They were sure he was a prophet (Lk. 20:6), although he performed no miracle. What he said about Jesus came to pass (Jn. 10:40, 41). He disclaimed any pretense to the Messiahship (Ac. 13:24, 25).
11. He was imprisoned and beheaded by Herod for his preaching (Mt. 4:12; 11:2-4; 14:2-10; Mk. 6:14-25). While in prison,

he wondered how Jesus was going to fulfill his (John's) predictions (Lk. 7:19-24).

12. Some of his disciples were Apollos (Ac. 18:24-26) and 12 others at Ephesus (Ac. 19:1-7), certainly Andrew (Jn. 1:40) and perhaps Simon Peter (Jn. 1:41-42). "The other disciple" or John the Evangelist (Jn. 1:37-40) and his "own" brother, James, are supposed by some to be also the Baptist's disciples. Maybe also were Philip and Nathanael (Jn. 1:43-49) because of their proximity to John's baptism when in reality they were Galileans of Bethsaida. Were Joseph Justus Barsabbas and Matthias also his disciples? (Cf. Ac. 1:21-23)

**John the Baptist came preaching.** The fact that he was called "the Baptizer" indicates the uniqueness of his work. Had there been other "baptists" or even "baptisms" on the scale or for the purposes practiced by John, it is assumed that he would not have been thus labelled. Though there were many washings under the Mosaic Law (Heb. 9:10; Lev. 14:9; 15; 16:28; Num. 19:7, 19), these were self-baptisms and were not required as an indication of personal commitment to the immediate advent of the Messiah. (See Ac. 19:1-4) Any comparison of the practice of John with the baptism of proselytes must reckon with the divine origin of John's baptism as contrasted to the doubtful origins of the other. (See Edersheim, *Life*, I, 273) Again, John is called "the Baptist" and not "John the Essene," apparently because his contemporaries could mark a clear distinction between this intensely evangelistic preacher who appealed to the entire Jewish nation to repent and prepare themselves for the immediate appearance of the Messiah by a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, as contrasted with exclusive sect of Qumranites, the Essenes, who manifested no such discernible program of missionary activity, and who apparently knew of no personal Messiah immediately to appear.

**Other evidences that John the Baptist was no Essene:**

1. His food and dress were not Essenic. While he ate "locusts," the Essenes abstained from animal food (Edersheim, *Life*, Vol. I, p. 264, Philo, *Quod Omnis Probus Liber*). Usually, the public dress of the Essenes, which became almost their insignia, was a white linen garment (ISBE, 1000, citing Hyppolytus, *Refutations*).
2. The Essene doctrine of God's absolute preordination of every-

thing would logically deny John's doctrine of personal responsibility.

3. John was intensely missionary and evangelistic in the proclamation of his messianic message, whereas the Qumranites (if they may be identified with the Essenes) had no discernible message or program for winning new adherents except by adopting the children of others to train in their ways. John's concern was national, while Essenic concern was self-development (at the expense of national revival) which never brought its adherents to real, outgoing love for their fellow Jews.
4. John actually prepared the way for the Messiah, whereas the members of the Qumran community, despite their messianic fervor and piety, never apparently recognized the Messiah when He came, insofar as their relationship to Jesus is known.
5. Although the messages of the Essenes and John are both apocalyptic in their messianic hopes, the predictions of the Essenes are general and visionary, hence, not truly prophetic, whereas John's predictions were specific and immediately verified in the coming of the Messiah.  
(See ISBE article, p. 997f; Unger, *Archeology and the NT*, 88ff.)

**In the wilderness of Judea.** This barren region of rugged gorges and desolate badlands extended along the western side of the Dead Sea to approximately five miles north of the sea up the Jordan Valley. It is located in the eastern part of Judah where the land plunges into that valley and is usually arid, thus inhabitable, except by some wild life. (Cf. Mk. 1:13) The Jordan River flows past the northern end of this wilderness before entering the Dead Sea. It was probably at the point where the eastern trade route crossed the Jordan that John began his preaching, for the location afforded an audience among the travellers compelled to pause at the ford, and it afforded a place suitable for baptizing. Evidently, John did not remain here exclusively (cf. Jn. 10:40), because later he was baptizing "in Bethany beyond the Jordan" (Jn. 1:28) and still later "at Aenon near Salim" (Jn. 3:23). Luke specifically declares that John made his message known "in all the region round about the Jordan." (3:3)

This wild country not only formed the background for John's preaching, but undoubtedly wrought the steel which was his character: His life-long habitual home in the desert (Lk. 1:80). He was away

from the luxuries, the comforts of society and the outward prosperity but corrupted morals. This must have prepared John in such a manner as to equip him to leap fully matured upon the stage of human events and call the nation to repent. He would need to have been thoroughly tested and proven before he would face a people indifferent to religion and a religious leadership outwardly orthodox but really corrupt.

By the calculations of men (cf. Jn. 7:3, 4) the wilderness would seem a strangely inappropriate, barren field of labor, as there were no great cities where men could be reached with so important a message. However, it was an ideal location for the very fact that it was away from the distractions of city life, and, at the same time, close to water for baptism. John was such a preacher that once he had fired the interest and imagination of the first few contacted with a message of the Messiah soon to appear, the news raced throughout the surrounding region and the people came to him!

**3:2 Repent!** The first word from God uttered in nearly 400 years brings clearly into focus all that would restore that perfect fellowship with God, which was lost since the first sin. It strikes the keynote for the entire kingdom of God. None may enter this kingdom with his baggage of personal, willful sins, nor under his own terms. Repentance is that unconditional surrender to the will of God that lays down the arms of self-righteousness and self-justification and asks, "What must I do to accept the terms of pardon?" This demand of God that men repent possesses tremendous power for the transformation of the race. It clearly demands the renunciation of any and all cherished sins, for they ruptured fellowship with God from the very beginning and have continued to do so ever since. This command to repent cannot be substituted by claims of righteousness, or refused on the grounds of lineage, nor evaded by hiding among the masses who also do not wish to change their lives. It is personal, born of convictions; God would change men by teaching them to change their convictions. Jesus and John preached and appealed to these convictions to induce Israel to repent:

1. The conviction of God's authority over the sinner and of His perfect righteousness (cf. Ro. 2:1-16; Ezra 9:13, 15; Ps. 51:4b; Dan. 9:4, 7a);
2. The conviction of one's own guilt (cf. II Co. 5:21; Ro. 3:10-23; Ezra 9:6b, 7, 15; Ps. 32:5; 51:1-17; Prov. 28:13; Dan. 9:5-13);

3. A conviction of the fear of the Lord based upon what is known of His purity and our own iniquity. A man who never trembles in fear of his sin and God's punishment will never repent (cf. Lk. 13:3, 5; Ezra 9:14; Prov. 19:23; 14:27; 15:33; 16:6; Dan. 9:13);
4. A sense of shame regarding the manner of life lived out of connection and harmony with the character and will of God (cf. Ro. 6:21; Jer. 3:3; 8:12; Ezra 9:6; Dan. 9:7);
5. The certainty of the goodness, love and mercy of God (Ro. 2:4; II Pet. 3:9, 13; Psa. 103: all, but esp. vv. 3, 10). God has even granted man the opportunity to repent! (Ac. 5:31; 11:18; Heb. 12:17; Dan. 9:9);
6. The certain conviction of the reality of those precious treasures which God promises to those willing to surrender all to Him. If the changing of human nature is the changing of the desires of that nature, then, the changing power of repentance is in the desiring of different desires. There is purifying power in hope (II Pet. 1:3-11; I Jn. 3:1-3) which forces out of the picture all that does not agree with that new affection. If a man is obsessed with a great desire, or a great idea, such as that which God offers in the Kingdom of Christ, there are not enough obstacles to stop him from obtaining them!

The full process of repentance involves the complete change of the man (Ac. 26:18; II Co. 7:8-11)

**The Kingdom of heaven is at hand.** This is the positive, exciting reason for John's stern demand of the nation: not a mere negative rejection of certain past sins or even a habit of sinfulness, but rather a positive preparation for the sudden appearance of the King and the commencement of His rule. But what sort of kingdom will it be? It will be the long-awaited rule of God in the hearts of men empowered by their effective repentance. Edersheim (*Life*, I, 265) sums up the nature and importance of this central theme of John's preaching:

Concerning this 'Kingdom of Heaven,' which was the great message of John, and the great work of Christ Himself, we may here say, that it is the whole Old Testament *sublimated*, and the whole New Testament *realised*. The idea of it did not lie hidden in the Old, to be opened up in the New

Testament—as did the mystery of its realization. But this rule of heaven and Kingship of Jehovah was the very substance of the Old Testament; the object of the calling and mission of Israel; the meaning of all its ordinances, whether civil or religious; the underlying idea of all its institutions. It explained alike the history of the people, the dealings of God with them, and the prospects opened up by the prophets. Without it the Old Testament could not be understood; it gave perpetuity to its teaching, and dignity to its representations. This constituted alike the real contrast between Israel and the nations of antiquity, and Israel's real title to distinction. Thus the whole Old Testament was the preparatory presentation of the rule of heaven and of the Kingship of its Lord.

Study this concept as expressed in law, prophecy, and popular devotion: Ex. 19:6; I Sam. 12:12; II Sam. 7:8-16; Psa. 2:6; 5:2; 10:16; 22:28; 24:7-10; 29:10; 44:4; 45:6, 7; 47; 48:1, 2; 74:12; 84:3; 95:3; 98:6; 145:1, 11-13; Isa. 9:6, 7; 33:17-22; 37:16; 43:15; Jer. 10:6-10; 30:9; Dan. 2:44; 7:9-28; Zech. 14:9, 16, 17. John's hearers believed in God, at least formally, and were acquainted with God's revelations in the OT, but a people indifferent to its obligations to God under that revelation are certainly not prepared to receive additional revelation. They must repent before they can believe the gospel! Instead of calling the nation to military exercises to prepare for the restoration of national glory, a call which would have been perfectly in accord with the common expectation, John challenged Israel to a personal, immediate and drastic change of life, their conduct and their hopes.

3:3 **This is he.** John the Baptist is the God-sent fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, not merely history repeated: there is no other "voice." (Jn. 1:23; also Mk. 1:2; Mt. 11:10)

**In the wilderness.** Delitzsch (*Isaiah*, II, 141), following the parallelism in the Hebrew, construes this phrase, not with the crier, but as the place where the preparation was to be made for the Messiah's coming. Luke (3:5) gives the full quotation of this prophecy (Isa. 40:3ff), defining the heart of Israel as a spiritual wilderness containing hindrances and obstacles which would impede the progress of the kingdom of God in its forward advance. Sin and impenitence had raised mountains of obstruction; only repentance could



open the road to the Lord. God means that Israel is to prepare herself so that God who is coming to deliver shall find her in such a spiritual state as befits His glory and plan. John would need to encourage the down-cast, humiliate the self-righteous and self-secure, unmask the dishonest and reduce the unapproachably haughty into submission. The very reason for John's coming to prepare Israel was the all-too-obvious fact that Israel was not ready. Note in this connection the messages of all the prophets. With one accord, they all declare that there was hardly any period when Israel was "ready for the coming of her God." No study could be more fruitful than that of Malachi, the last voice of the OT, as he points to the specific instances in which Israel had need of thorough correction by repentance.

**The way of the Lord.** It is Jehovah for whose coming John must awaken the nation, not merely an angelic emanation of deity, if Isaiah's prophecy (ch. 40) is to be taken seriously. Malachi (2:17—4:6) also declares unequivocally that it is Jehovah whom Israel sought and would soon see come suddenly to His temple.

(The "angel of the covenant" is Jehovah, as is demanded both by the parallelism in Mal. 3:1 and the complaint of Israel in Mal. 2:17, as well as Israel's understanding of this "messenger:" Ex. 3:2, 4, 6, 14, 15; 13:21, 22; 14:19; 23:20-23; 33:14; Deut. 4:37; Isa. 63:9)

The longing cry of Isaiah (64:1), "O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down!" and the sobbed prayer, "How long, O Lord? Wilt thou hide thyself forever?" (Psa. 89:46), as well as the hypocritical taunt "Where is the God of justice?" (Mal. 2:17) are about to be answered by the personal appearance of Jehovah of hosts.

## II. THE MAN'S MANNER

3:4 Everything John was, spoke so eloquently that everyone could hear clearly what he was saying! It was only the message that mattered to John and he subordinated everything to its propagation. Obviously a man of self-denial, he was a living illustration of how little man really needs for existence. Dried **locusts** were a "clean" food (Lev. 11:22) and were apparently as abundant as **honey** (Ex. 3:8, 17; Deut. 8:7-9; cf. Lk. 24:42). His mode of life was somewhat similar to that of the Nazarite (Lk. 1:15; cf. Num. 6:1-23); his dress typical of the ancient prophets (II Kgs. 1:8; Zech. 13:4). His appearance reenforced his preaching: he challenged all who made food and

drink, house and clothes their chief concern in life, to turn from such vanity and concern themselves with far more essential problems. Note carefully that John did not call them to asceticism, but to repentance. He did not offer his dress and diet as the norm of piety. Doubtless, even then as today, there were many ascetics who would offer their asceticism as their excuse for not repenting! John did not demand that those who had food and raiment should leave that (Lk. 3:11), or that those in particular occupations should cease those functions within the society (Lk. 3:12-14). He called the nation to leave its SIN.

Every movement for righteousness finds its scoffers standing on the sidelines, even this one (Mt. 11:18). However, Jesus had nothing but praise for John (Mt. 11:7-15).

### III. THE MAN'S MESSAGE OF MORALITY

3:5, 6 **Then went out . . . and were baptized.** The two Greek verbs (*exeporeueto* and *ebaptizonto*: imperfect tense) vividly describe the constant flow of people who kept going out to hear John and were being baptized by him. **Unto him:** but what were they going out to see? Did they seek some novel spectacle? Did they find a fickle man, easily moved by popular opinion, or rather a molder of that opinion? Did they seek some one who pampered his body with rich foods and soft clothing? Even a great prophet? What was it that moved them to such repentance, such confession of sins and baptism? They were brought face-to-face with the greatest man who ever lived, the very herald of God and precursor of the Messiah! They were faced with their sins, both national and personal, the imminent judgment of God, and the sudden coming of the Christ. The message and the man were bound up in one indissoluble unity and they could see it. They could discern no way of escape from repentance without rejecting the counsel of God against themselves. (Cf. Mt. 11:2-19; Lk. 7:18-30) **All Judea, all the region** are common hyperboles meaning "many" or perhaps "most of the people of these regions came," as we say "everybody was there" when we actually mean that the major part of the populace came (Mt. 21:23-25; Lk. 7:30).

**They were baptized**, i.e., they were immersed in the Jordan, for that is the meaning of the word *baptizein* and all its cognates. There exists no linguistic evidence from the first century for any other meaning assigned to this word, other than "dip, submerge, plunge or overwhelm." On this point, see ISBE, articles on "Baptism" by Lutheran, Baptist and Pede-baptist authors, p. 385ff, which throw into

sharp contrast the speculation about the supposed meaning of the word when used to support their doctrines, as over against the simplicity and unity of meaning found in the Greek lexicons which must describe the word as it was actually used in the first century.

**Confessing their sins.** Whether the penitents confessed particular sins to John or their sinfulness in general is not so much the point as that they did confess sins they had kept hidden for years and had cherished as a way of life. The fear of God's wrath and their lack of preparation for the coming of the Messiah laid bare their sins and devastated their excuses. For heart-touching examples of such confessions, see Neh. 1:4-11; 9:2, 3; Ezra 9:5—10:1; Dan. 9:3-20; cf. Jas. 5:16; Ac. 19:8-19, esp. 18.

**3:7 When he saw many.** Though Luke (3:7) describes these words as addressed to the entire crowd, Matthew here is specifying what part of the crowd was thus addressed. However, any of the crowd who would tend to agree with the sentiments of the religious leaders are thus deprived of refuge against the command of John to repent personally.

The *Pharisees* were a Jewish religio-political party which laid extreme importance upon the strictest outward observance of the law and its traditional interpretations by the rabbis. Being gross legalists, they were self-righteous hypocrites, cultivating a hollow, ostentatious formalism. (Cf. Josephus *Antiquities*, XIII, 5, 9; 10:5; XVIII, 1, 3; Lk. 18:9; 12; Mt. 23; Ac. 23:8) The *Sadducees* rejected the rabbinical traditions as well as the doctrine of the resurrection, of angels, spirits, immortality and the judgment to come. They included in their number many of the richest and most influential Jews, such as the high priests' family. (Cf. *Ant.*, XVIII, 1, 4; *Wars*, II, 8, 14; Mt. 16:1-12; 22:23; Ac. 4:1; 5:17; 23:8)

**Coming to his baptism** (*epi to baptisma*). This English phrase does not convey the two possibilities which the Greek phrase offers: (1) The Pharisees and Sadducees were coming *to* or *toward* the vicinity where John was baptizing. In this case, they are pictured as merely being present to judge for themselves the nature of John's ministry, criticize where they might, or perhaps to seize control of the movement if possible, lest they lose their influence with the people. John's words that are addressed to them, in this case, would be taken as ironic, because they would have denied the necessity of their repentance or need for baptism. They rejected John's baptism (Mt. 21:25; Lk. 7:30), because of their dependence upon physical rela-

tion to Abraham. John may, then, be paraphrased thus: "You vipers' offspring (a metaphor true to fact), who prompted you to flee from the coming wrath (an ironic metaphor, contrary to fact, meaning: "Surely YOU are not fleeing from the coming wrath too? Not!") (2) *epi to baptisma* may also mean that they were coming for the purpose of baptism. (Cf. Arndt-Gingrich, 289) Thus, they were coming "to have themselves baptized." Compare the parallel in Luke 3:7 (*ekporeumenois baptisthenai hup'autou*). But why were they really coming?

Could it be that these Pharisees and Sadducees, being human, felt the weariness of their outward formalistic observances from which any semblance of reality and holiness had long since departed? Did they too have sorrows, aches and spiritual unrest that accused them of their own spiritual emptiness? Were they thus led to sigh and search for something real and nourishing? Could it be that they knew that formalism and sterile morality cannot satisfy man's conscience? Or that infidelity raises only doubts and cannot rest a troubled heart? If so, John knew that they needed to be shaken hard and brought beyond that point of hidden convictions masquerading under the guise of religious respectability. They were experts in the art of dodging repentance, but this time there was to be no dodging! But, lest we feel too secure, let us remember Hebrews 2:3.

Undoubtedly, they did not all feel their need. John immediately unmasks their insincerity and impenitence and challenges their fitness for baptism. The general situation may explain their real motivation: since the new movement had attained such proportions, they may have feared the loss of their leadership of the people, if they did not join it and attempt to seize the control of the movement. They could not really be fleeing from the coming wrath if they did not believe that THEY were in danger of it. Probably they merely pretended to fear God's judgment, as a cover for their real intent.

**Offspring of vipers** was a title justly deserved by the Jewish rulers inasmuch as they poisoned the religious principles of the nation and crucified God's Son. (Study also Gen. 3:1-15; Rev. 12:9, 14, 15; Mt. 12:34; 23:33; Jn. 8:44)

**Who warned you?** Who indeed but the father of lies could have prompted these hypocrites to believe they could actually escape the wrath of God by mere outwardly religious, hypocritical acts? Were they really so blind to fail to see that their manner of life could only run more directly into the path of that which they sought to escape?

Baptized hundreds of times, they would never be able to escape the wrath of God!

The **wrath of God** is no figure of speech, no mere expression attributing to God human emotions. It is the clear, necessary reaction of God's holy, righteous character, reacting to man's sin which is the persistent rejection of His love and mercy. (Cf. Zeph. 1:14-18; 2:2, 3; Mal. 3:2-18; 4:1, 5; Mt. 23:33; Lk. 21:20-24, esp. 23b; Jn. 3:36; Ro. 1:18ff; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6; I Th. 1:10)

**3:8 Bring forth fruit worthy of repentance!** John is saying, "Do not bring to this movement of true repentance toward God that cunning hypocrisy for which you are well known! Do not merely profess to be repenting, but show that you mean it by forsaking your sins! Do not make this trip to the water but another sinful act of hypocrisy!" These Pharisees and Sadducees could not remain what they were: they too must repent without deception or evasion, and be prepared to face all the consequences that arise out of such a dramatic change. There are some "fruits" that are unworthy of the profession to repent: a passing regret, a few tears, an excuse or two, a wish to be different, a brief outward betterment, perhaps even a resolve to change that becomes forgotten with the passage of time. Others "pay their tithes," pray regularly, support religion in a flurry of "busy-ness" but they are unwilling to admit that they are trying to evade that death to self which is true repentance. Others dare to use all manner of other devices merely to justify themselves as they are and to keep them from doing their one duty to repent!

But the *fruits* that God seeks are the various acts which show a changed heart. Repentance must issue in a real change of life that no longer presumes upon the grace and mercy of God. Even if it is not always possible for men to recognize the truly repentant, God always does (Cf. Mt. 7:15-20 with Ac. 1:24; Rev. 2:23). True repentance is inward but it must affect all the issues of life. Luke (3:10-14) describes how this preaching cut into the conscience of the common people too, making them cry out, desiring to know specifically what they must do to manifest the genuineness of their repentance. John demands that the selfish person, or those who had been indifferent to the needs of others, should show their repentance by practical deeds of compassion and mercy. Those who had been guilty of crooked dealing by extortion should show their repentance by honest dealing. Those in the military should shun sins common to

soldiers; the greedy and overbearing must produce contentment and gentle courtesy. If we would produce such fruit (Acts 26:10 means us!) we must:

1. *Confess our sin*, for true repentance necessitates the humility to admit that we have sinned. (See Prov. 28:13; Psa. 32:5, 6; 51; Jer. 2:35; 3:13)
2. *Repair the damage of our sin* whereinsofar it can be done. (Cf. Num. 5:6, 7) Sadly, this is not always possible, for these Pharisees and Sadducees had taught others to disregard God's will (Cf. Mt. 5:19, 20; 15:1-20; 23), but they could not know how far their own former evil influence had reached, and thus could not repair all the damage wrought by their teaching.
3. *Refuse to repeat* any sin under any circumstance.

3:9 **Think not to say.** Probably very few Jews were not inclined to cherish secretly the reminder of their relationship to Abraham and all of the consequent blessings that that relationship was supposed to confer. Even those who were trying to live righteously in that age must have regarded John's statement as absolutely incredible, for to all of Judaism, Abraham was unique. (Cf. Jn. 8:30-59; Lk. 16:19-31) According to their view, his meritorious goodness and favor with God not only sufficed for himself, but was such a treasury of merit that all the claims and needs of his descendents could not exhaust! And yet, their pride in their Abrahamic lineage was all the more inexcusable, since they had been clearly warned by the prophets that theirs was not an exclusive relationship irrespective of their sins. They could by no means escape punishment for their sins. (Cf. Isa. 48:1, 2; Jer. 8:8; 7:3, 4, 8-10; Micah 3:11)

John's prophetic task was to turn "the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers" (Mal. 4:6; cf. Lk. 1:17). The "fathers" are those illustrious ancestors of the Israelite nation, the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and generally the pious forefathers such as David and the godly men of his time. (Cf. Jer. 15:1; Ezek. 14:14, 20) The "children" are their degenerate descendents of Malachi's own time and the succeeding ages. "Turning the heart of the fathers to the sons" does not mean merely directing the love of the fathers to the sons once more, but also restoring the heart of the fathers in the sons, or giving to the sons the father's disposition and affections. Then will the heart of the sons

also return to the faith of their fathers, so that they will be like-minded with their pious fathers. (Keil on *Malachi*, 472) In making their claim to the lineage of Abraham, these Jews were thinking wrongly about their father. They supposed that fleshly ties automatically carried with them all spiritual benefits and material blessings.

But John could have also said as well: "Do not think to plead special treatment by God on the basis of your genius, rank, beauty, wealth, power or splendid service to the nation! Divorced from your real character, they count for absolutely nothing in the supreme matter of eternal destiny. In fact, they may actually impede your entrance into the kingdom, inasmuch as they might hide from your very eyes your need to repent." Abraham's real children are those who express Abraham's faith and obedience to God's will. (Gal. 3:6, 7, 9, 26-29)

**These stones.** Does John mean by this expression, taken as a figure of speech, to indicate the Gentiles or perhaps the lower-class Jews who, in the eyes of the Pharisees and Sadducees, could make no claims to arrive at their "superior righteousness and rights to God's blessings"? Or does he mean literal stones, to show that the vital relation to Abraham, which counts with God, is not that which is based upon fleshly ties, but upon a real, inward character? Plummer (*Luke*, 90) notes: "It was God who made Abraham to be the rock whence the Jews were hewn (Isa. 51:1, 2); and out of the most unpromising material He can make genuine children of Abraham (Ro. 4; 9:6, 7; 11:13-24; Gal. 4:21-31)."

This passage may explain the stumbling-block in the mind of Nicodemus (cf. Jn. 3:3-9), for even personal self-righteousness, acquired position and blood-descent from Abraham would not avail for entrance into the Kingdom of God. Only a complete re-birth could accomplish this. (For other Christian teaching against trust in human relationships or relation by physical descent for salvation and blessing, see Jn. 1:12, 13; 3:3; 8:31-58; Mt. 8:11, 12; Lk. 16:24; Phil. 3:2-21; Col. 3:11.)

**3:10 Even now the axe lies.** Judgment is fast approaching! But, some would ask, is fear a proper religious motive? Yes, for God addresses His message to every sentiment of the human heart that "by all means He might save some." If love and grace do not reach the heart, the threat and terror of judgment must be given opportunity to try to stir the conscience. Even the threat of judgment on God's part demonstrates His long-suffering love and mercy. The conscience is one of God's gifts, and he who destroys it must answer for it.

The figure of the tree is clear: the trees represent the Jewish nation as a whole; every tree stands for each individual; the axe, God's judgment. The trees designated for felling have already been selected on the basis of failure to produce fruit worthy of God's continued grace. **The axe lies at the root:** the coming judgment will be complete and will involve the entire stand of trees. The **fire** is the punitive judgment of God. (Cf. Mal. 4:1; Jn. 15:6; Mt. 13:40; 18:8, 9; Tit. 3:14)

These predictions of judgment are revealed by inspiration of God to John for publication. However, John's personal interpretation of these prophecies was that Jesus would begin this fiery separation and judgment immediately upon the commencement of His ministry. Moreover, this might have seemed to John to be the meaning of Malachi 3:1, 2. However, this interpretation overly constricts the time element that lies between the Messiah's coming and His execution of world judgment. This mistaken interpretation by John later troubled him since Jesus was seemingly not fulfilling the prophecy of John as he thought He should. (See Mt. 11:2-6)

#### IV. THE MAN'S MASTER—THE MESSIAH

3:11 **I baptize you with water unto repentance.** On the phrase "with water" or "in water," see below on "in the Holy Spirit." The problem in John's words is to discover what is meant by "baptism UNTO repentance," for it would seem at first glance that John's baptism led to, or resulted in, repentance. However, the tenor of the whole passage seems to be just the reverse: John presumably refused to baptize any who did not demonstrate the genuineness of their repentance, although this cannot be clearly proven. On the other hand, he might have baptized all comers, while challenging the conscience of all, lest they mock the serious import of the baptism by reducing it to another act of sham religion. In this case, he would be leaving the decision to be baptized clearly up to each conscience and he proceeded to baptize all comers upon their confession of need, on the assumption that few hypocrites would risk exposure. The problem is not simply linguistic here, because the Greek preposition *eis*, usually translated in the figurative sense: "to, toward, so as to, in order to, for the purpose that, etc.", (as, for example, II Co. 7:9, 10; Ro. 10:10; 2:4; Mt. 26:28), seems to indicate that their repentance was the goal which John sought to accomplish by baptizing the people. Now, John preached a baptism that conferred the inestimable



blessing of remission of sins upon the truly repentant (Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3) in order to cause the people to repent so as to be fit candidates for his baptism and its resulting forgiveness of sins. Therefore, it was not the baptism which John held before the people as the premium most desirable, so much as it was the remission of sins connected with it. Thus, the desire to obtain their soul's deep need of forgiveness would prompt the people to see their prior need to repent.

If it be true that the immediate goal of John's baptism was to cause the people to repent so that God could forgive them, was there no other purpose in John's ministry, other than calls to individual repentance in view of the coming Messiah? Or was he not also thus admitting those thus baptized to that group of repentant Israelites who, by bringing forth fruits worthy of their penitence, thus prepared themselves for the Kingdom of God and thus identified themselves with the soon-to-appear Messiah?

**He who comes after me.** "The coming one" (*ho erchomenos*) may have become a stereotyped phrase for "the expected Messiah." (Cf. Psa. 118:26 as cited in Mt. 21:9; 23:39; then, Hab. 2:3 as cited in Heb. 10:37; cf. Mal. 3:1; Jn. 1:15; 3:31; 6:14; 11:27; Ac. 19:4) In these NT passages, the above-cited Greek phrase appears with little modification, although it must be admitted that, in these same passages, the phrase may appertain to the wording of the sentences merely as the way in which each author wished to express himself without particular attempt to record a fixed phrase. However, Arndt-Gingrich (article: *erchomai*) cite more evidence that indicates that the Christ is meant. Again, there is particular point in John's anguished question, "Are you the coming one (*ho erchomenos*) or do we await another?" (Mt. 11:3)

The above-mentioned problem becomes important when it is observed how John seems to avoid directly using the word "Messiah," and uses instead a seemingly innocent circumlocution, "the coming One." "Messiah" was a term loaded with explosive, political implications in the Jewish mind. John never did call Jesus "the Christ," although he attributed to Him every other title of deity which leads to the same conclusion. Thus, he reduced the stimulus to merely excited nationalists and, at the same time, improved the understanding of his hearers.

**He is mightier than I.** Here, as later before the Jerusalem investigating committee (Jn. 1:19-27), John disclaims all pretenses to Messiahship. His stirring challenge to righteousness, call to re-

pentance, his good news of the approaching kingdom, and his threat of judgment to come, left the impression that he was the Messiah himself (Lk. 3:15). The necessity to clarify his own position led John to frame that memorable figure of the slave unworthy of his glorious Master. But it is no mere figure, for it is exactly what John felt! (cf. Jn. 3:27-30)

Feel the contrast: **I indeed . . . but he . . .** John is saying, "If you think that my small ministry has been great, if you suppose me to be the great Elijah or the promised prophet or even the Christ Himself, you have not seen anything yet! My baptism is in water leading you to repentance, but His shall be in the Holy Spirit!"

**In the Holy Spirit.** The long-awaited time when God's promised Spirit would come is about to arrive. (Cf. Ezek. 36:26—37:14; 39:29; Joel 2:28f; Isa. 44:3) God kept His word (Ac. 1:5; 2:1-4; 10:44-48; 11:16) when His people were truly overwhelmed or submerged or immersed in God's Spirit.

Arguments based upon the presence or absence of the Greek preposition *en* here and in the parallel passages fail to establish their point, since Mark does not use it at all (1:8), while Matthew uses it in both phrases (3:11) and Luke uses it with the Holy Spirit (3:15), but not with water. The simple locative case, without the preposition *en* may still express the element in which the baptism takes place, be it water or the Holy Spirit. Or if the case be construed as instrumental, it expresses the instrument or thing with which the baptism is effected. The addition of *en* may express either the place *in* which, or the instrument *with* which the baptisms were to be effected. Whether the baptisms here mentioned are effected by immersion must be solved on other considerations than the use of *en*, "in, with." However, the Greek lexicons are clear on the meaning of the action involved in *baptize* and *baptism*.

But not only the joyful moment for the fulfillment of God's promise of the Holy Spirit, but also the "great and terrible day of the Lord" was drawing near in which God would come personally bringing judgment upon the house of Israel. (Cf. Mal. 3:1—4:6)

**He shall baptize you . . . (in or with) fire.** Various explanations of this "fire" are suggested:

1. That the "fiery" tongues at Pentecost are meant is improbable, since no fire ever appeared in connection with the coming of the Spirit on that day. (See Ac. 2:1-3)
2. Others suggest that only one baptism is meant under two terms: the blessing of the Holy Spirit and the kindling, illuminating and purifying which He brings into the life of the believer. (Cf. Mal. 3:2, 3) This suggestion is offered on the strength of the argument that the same persons will receive the Holy Spirit and the fire ("He will baptize YOU"). However, there is another "you" in verse 11, exactly parallel to this one, which cannot be taken in a specific sense, but must be taken only generally. It was not true that John was baptizing everyone with water, since the religious leaders rejected his baptism. Neither would it be true that Jesus should baptize indiscriminately everyone with the Holy Spirit and fire, for He will certainly separate the "you" (plural) into individuals.
3. Others suggest the fiery trials which Jesus' followers must undergo (Cf. Mk. 10:38, 39; Lk. 12:49, 50), although it may be doubted that John intended such trials as one of the glories of the Messianic Reign, which were to be contrasted with his own unworthy ministry.
4. Two baptisms are distinguished: the penitent with the Spirit, and the impenitent with penal fire. It should be noted that one of the features of OT prophecy is that it views great, widely-separated features of God's redemption and final judgment in small contexts without apparent regard to the great time intervals existing between them. John, like the old prophets, is seeing the future without the perspective of time. Thus, while the baptism of the Spirit occurred on Pentecost and on one other significant occasion thereafter, (Ac. 10:44ff; 11:15-17) the real baptism of fire is left until the end of the age. (Rev. 20:15; 21:8). Contextual limitations determine the meaning of this "fire:" the separation of good from bad both precedes and follows this verse and may be regarded as in John's mind as he mentions the blessings of the Holy Spirit upon the righteous and the condemnation of the wicked in this intervening verse.

3:12 **Whose fan.** Here John changes his figure of speech from the Mighty One who will baptize, to the Great Harvester. The picture is that of an ancient threshing floor which is a hard, level surface 40-80 feet in diameter. The grain, straw and all, was laid on its surface just as it was brought from the grainfields. After the grain was trodden out on the floor by oxen, it was then winnowed, or, separated from the chaff, by tossing the straw and grain repeatedly into the air with a large wooden shovel called "the fan." The wind blew the light chaff and dust to one side while the good heavy grain fell back onto the threshing floor. After two or three winnowings, the grain was washed, dried and passed through a sieve, and finally stored in granaries. The useless dusty chaff left over after the winnowing process was then burned.

John's meaning is simple and clear: the *threshing floor* stands for the world with its mixed population of saints and sinners. The great, final judgment, to be executed by Christ Himself, will demonstrate the true nature of every man whether he be *wheat* or *chaff*, all of which is seen in the *thorough cleaning of the threshing floor* by the farmer. Then, at the end, there will be the salvation of the righteous, represented by the *gathering of the wheat into the garner*, and the punishment of the wicked, by the *burning up of the chaff*. (Cf. Mt. 13:30, 36-43)

The idea that any mere man could be in a position to execute these judgments is unthinkable. Therefore, the deity of the Messiah stands directly behind these words which describe His power and right of judgment. And yet, the judgment is not all in His hands. When men are confronted with the Christ, they are faced with an unavoidable choice: they must either be for or against Him, accept Him or reject Him. It is precisely this choice that settles their destiny. The righteous are separated from the unrighteous by their reaction to Jesus.

*Unquenchable fire.* The figure of speech, taken from the threshing floor, is too limited to tell all the necessary truth, so John adds a word that seems to be contradictory in the nature of the case, but is quite clear in revealing a punishment beyond present human knowledge and experience. God is able to provide a fire that could not be extinguished for eternity, even if all the fire we have ever seen be extinguishable. Therefore, speculations as to the nature of such inextinguishable fire are valueless; those who experience it will have no doubt as to its nature or reality. (Cf. Isa. 5:24; 66:24;

Jer. 7:20; Zeph. 1:14-18; Mt. 25:41; Mk. 9:43) Other passages which teach this same final separation and effectively deny the popular doctrines of universalism ("God is too loving, too good-hearted to damn anyone"), ultimate restoration ("God will somehow purge the wicked of their sins, purifying them for ultimate salvation."), and total annihilation ("God will finally end their torment by utterly destroying the wicked."), are the following: II Th. 1:8-12; Mk. 9:48; Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43; 25:41; II Pet. 3:7-11.

## FACT QUESTIONS

1. Tell all you can about John the Baptist: his father, mother, birth, naming, youth, qualifications, manner of life, message, length of ministry, places of service, testimony to Jesus, prophecies about him, his similarity to the Essenes, the origin and nature of his baptism, and its relation to Christian baptism.
2. Since Matthew concluded his second chapter with the return of Jesus to Nazareth with Joseph and Mary, how could Matthew initiate his next section of Jesus' life by saying "in those days"? Are we to understand that John began his ministry while Jesus was yet a child? What other information helps us to correctly interpret Matthew's introductory phrase "in those days"?
3. Why is John called "the Baptist"? What does this appellation suggest about his unique ministry?
4. Give specific directions how to find the wilderness where John preached and describe its general nature. Locate the general scene of his baptizing.
5. What was the central theme of John's preaching?
6. What was the basic purpose for John's coming to preach the special message he brought? What was John to accomplish?
7. Who was "the Lord" (Isa. 40:3) for whom John prepared?
8. Why was not Israel ready for the Messiah's coming?
9. What does the word "repent" or "repentance" mean? How is John's baptism a "baptism unto repentance"?
10. What prophetic passages were brought to fulfillment in the message and ministry of John the Baptist?
11. What blessing did the response to the message of John bring upon those who were baptized?
12. How far-reaching was John's influence with the Jewish people?
13. Why did the multitudes respond so readily to John's preaching?

14. What response did John seek among the religious leaders of the day?
15. What religious parties sent representatives to hear John? Who were these parties (what did they officially believe)?
16. Why did John address the religious leaders with such a fearful warning?
17. What is "the wrath to come"? How could they flee from it?
18. What are "fruits worthy of repentance"?
19. What does John mean by bringing up Abraham? In what connection did he mention Abraham?
20. What is the terrible danger in claiming relationship to spiritual, God-fearing ancestors, that was inherent in the way that the religious leaders were implied as reasoning?
21. How does the figure of the axe and the trees correct this mistaken mode of reasoning?
22. What promise did John make regarding the coming of Jesus, and what is meant by the various terms of that promise? (What is the baptism in the Holy Spirit? When did it take place? Where? Upon whom? What is the baptism in fire? When did it take place? Where? Upon whom?)
23. Explain the figure of winnowing grain literally, and then show what use John made of the figure.
24. John was born of the tribe of Levi, dressed like the great, ancient prophets, preached a message of righteousness and repentance, but presented no supernatural credentials, such as miracles (Jn. 10:40, 41), and died before His predictions about Jesus could be verified. How could it be clear, then, to the religious leaders and multitudes alike, that he had the authority of God to thunder such a fiery message, initiate such a baptism, and make such exciting predictions about the coming of the Kingdom of God and the "One mightier than I"? Were not the learned doctors of the law justified in responding to Jesus' question regarding John's baptism, "We do not know whether his baptism is from heaven or from men," (Mt. 21:25-27), and were they not justified in not believing him (Mt. 21:32)?
25. What does the apostle Paul say about John and his ministry?
26. What is the judgment of Jesus upon John, as to his ministry, his personal greatness and his effectiveness?
27. How could so many people, as are indicated by the Evangelists' report of John's success, be free to come to hear John? Did not any of them work?

28. What is the relationship between the "forgiveness or remission of sins," enjoyed by those who accepted John's baptism, and that secured by Jesus' death on the cross? (Cf. Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3 with Heb. 9:22, 14, 15; Eph. 1:7) How could John's baptism be "for remission of sins"?
29. Were those who became disciples of John, thus preparing themselves for the commencement of the Kingdom, exempt from the sacrifices and service connected with the old Mosaic system?

### Section 6

## JESUS IS BAPTIZED BY JOHN

(Parallels: Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21, 22; cf. John 1:29-34)

TEXT: 3:13-17

13. Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to the Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him.
14. But John would have hindered him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?
15. But Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer *it* now: for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness. Then he suffered him.
16. And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway from the water: and lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon him;
17. and lo, a voice out of the heavens, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Do you think Jesus really needed to be immersed by John? If so, why? If not, why not?
- b. Why did John consider himself in need of immersion by Jesus, instead of Jesus having need of John's baptism?
- c. What do these phrases mean:
  - (1) "it becometh us"?
  - (2) "to fulfill all righteousness"?
  - (3) "he suffered him"?
- d. Why did God speak from heaven in this manner and on this particular occasion?
- e. What does Matthew mean by "the heavens were opened unto him"?

- f. How do you think Jesus reacted psychologically to that voice of His Father speaking to Him on this occasion?
- g. For what acts or attitudes of Jesus do you think God was expressing His pleasure in Jesus?
- h. Did anyone else hear the voice of God on this occasion as He identified Jesus as His Son? What of the multitudes who were constantly coming and going?

## PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

In those days that marked the height of John's revival of the nation, which was about the thirtieth year of Jesus' life, Jesus walked from Nazareth of Galilee to the Jordan to John to be immersed by him. But John tried to dissuade Him, saying, "I need you to baptize ME, and YOU come to me?" But Jesus replied, "Let it be so for the present, for we do well to conform in this way with all that God requires. This is the fitting way for both of us to do our full duty to God." Then John yielded and consented to immerse Jesus.

Now when the greater part of the people had been immersed, Jesus also was baptized. He immediately went up out of the water and was praying when, suddenly, the heavens opened. They, that is at least John and Jesus, saw the Spirit of God in a bodily form descending, as does a dove, upon Him and remaining. Then there came a voice from heaven which said, "You are my dearly loved Son: I am pleased and proud of you!"

## NOTES

### I. A PREPARED PERSON

**3:13 Jesus came from Galilee.** Mark specifies Nazareth as the beginning point of this 60-70 mile trip on foot to that stretch of the Jordan which flows through the wilderness of Judea about 5 miles north of the Dead Sea. Nazareth, for Jesus, meant home, the quiet life, rewarding toil and memories. All this is left behind for the stormy turbulence that shall be His short, busy career. However, He who leaves home to enter the service of God is no stripling of twelve years but a mature man who has learned the joys of honest labor, the worries of a household, and the fluctuations of business with all its headaches. Yes, here is a man who chooses not to remain hidden in a small Galilean hamlet, but rather to seize eagerly His responsibility as God's Son. As He turns His back upon the relatively



easy life and sets His face to go to the inevitable cross, in effect, He is praying, "Father, it was not with sacrifices, as offerings for sin, that you were pleased. But you have prepared for me a body, and in this body I have come to do your will." (Cf. Heb. 10:5-10)

## II. A PERPLEXED PROTEST

3:14 If John did not know Jesus as the Messiah (Jn. 1:31, 33), then why did he object to Jesus' request for immersion? His baptism was "for repentance" (3:11) and "for remission of sins" (Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3) and yet he obviously felt that Jesus did not need his baptism. Four reasons are suggested why he might have thus demurred:

1. The *family* reason. If the intimacy of John's and Jesus' families was maintained over the years, John would have known the pure life of Jesus, his kinsman (Lk. 1:36-56, 80), through contacts at least at the great feasts in Jerusalem. However, unless Jesus were known by John to be absolutely sinless, He would have needed John's baptism, at least, in John's opinion.
2. The *inspired* reason. God's prophet that he was, John must have been able to recognize the sinlessness of Jesus by prophetic insight, just as Elisha recognized the greed and falseness of Gehazi, or the treachery and cruelty of Hazeel (II Kgs. 5:26; 8:7-15; see also Lk. 7:39). However, until the Spirit descended upon Him, John had not that divine assurance that Jesus was the Messiah nor could he say with absolute certainty, "This is the Christ," however sure he himself may have felt that He was. Of this one thing John was sure: here before him stood the cleanest, purest, godliest man his eyes had ever looked upon!
3. The *ethical* reason. He stood in the presence of Him "the latchet of whose shoes he was not worthy to unloose." As John had faced the Pharisees and Sadducees, he had accorded them the very opposite treatment (3:7-10), refusing to immerse them because of their sinful impenitence. He hesitates to baptize Jesus because of His known purity.
  - a. John, by confessing his need of Jesus' baptism, thus confessed his own sin. Or was he thinking of Jesus' administration of the baptism in the Holy Spirit?

- b. By acknowledging Jesus' right to baptize even him whom God had appointed as a divinely-sent prophet, John was placing Jesus far above himself. Perhaps he suspected Him also to be the Messiah.
- 4. The *personal* reason. In his perplexity, John shows his personal ignorance of God's will for Jesus and of what really constitutes God's idea of a Messiah. Although John knew he was unworthy to baptize Him and thus shows his deep, reverent humility, he was on the verge of forgetting his own commission to introduce the Christ, of neglecting the express command of God, and of overlooking that very sign which had been given him by which to recognize the Messiah (Jn. 1:33). Although John was wrong in his understanding, yet his actions ring true psychologically, and, as a matter of fact, had not the narrative included his hesitation, the baptism of Jesus, recorded without any other comment, would seem to compromise His sinlessness.

Maybe all or parts of these reasons caused John to take the position he did. Yet, this misunderstanding and suggestion both provide one more temptation to Jesus, a test similar to the sorrow of His parents when He should have been expected to about His Father's affairs. Even as then, He refused to be turned aside from His divine calling and position, overcoming by relying upon perfect obedience to God.

### III. A PARAMOUNT AND PERVADING PRINCIPLE

**3:15 Thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness.**

1. The problem: The question has puzzled the Church for centuries, just as it raised problems for John the Baptist that day: why did Jesus come to be baptized? Jesus did not intimate that John was correct in suggesting that He did not need to be baptized, but why? Several answers have been suggested:

- a. That Jesus, by His baptism, identifying Himself with the search of men for God, in order that He might reveal God to them in this their hour of new sin-consciousness? Certainly, one reason He began His ministry at this time was the timeliness of the hour in which the Jews were facing the reality of their sins as never before in immediately preceding centuries. But, could not Jesus have identified with them in other ways, or have begun His ministry without being baptized?

- b. Or, is Jesus, in this act of identification with those who truly need forgiveness and repentance, signifying that He is now ready to take upon Himself the responsibility of being their redeemer? Is He indicating that, though He be pure and yet steps into the same position shared by such sinners, He is therefore God's Lamb?
- c. Others suggest that Jesus came for His formal, solemn setting apart to His office as the Messiah and Redeemer of Israel. It is true that one of the main purposes of John's appointment was to introduce the Messiah to the world (Jn. 1:31). Further, it was proper that Jesus should have been set apart by His own forerunner, and that definite connection be shown with his ministry, as fulfilling its predictions and carrying forward its initiatives.
- d. *Permit it now* indicates that, in the case of Jesus' baptism, there was to be another purpose. While Jesus did not need the results obtained in the case of the others, i.e. transformation of life and forgiveness of sins, yet He needed another result: the perfect fulfillment of all the Father's will. Could He have gone on in His sinlessness as heretofore and have remained sinless to the end if at this point He did not do everything God had commanded? No, perfect holiness involves doing all God says to do, without rationalizing. Had Jesus refused or neglected to obey this precept of God, He would have failed, coming short of perfect righteousness.

2. His personal Purpose: "It becomes us to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus had to be immersed! There could be no doubt or hesitation for Him, once the all-important question as to the origin of John's baptism was answered: "The baptism of John, whence is it? from heaven or men?" (Mt. 21:25) Jesus submitted, not with any ulterior motive, but because John's baptism was from God. He refused to expect of others what He Himself had not undergone. Had He not so completely done God's will, His condemnation of the religious leaders (Mt. 21:25) would have had a hollow ring to it. This is why the Pharisees and Sadducees are so guilty: even if they were too self-deceived to see their need of repentance and forgiveness, at least they should have humbly submitted to be baptized by John "to fulfill all righteousness!" But, as it was, they doubly "rejected the counsel of God against themselves" (Lk. 7:30).

It must be remembered that the main element in repentance is the POSITIVE turning of the individual towards God with new determination to conform to His will, and not only the NEGATIVE turning away from sin as enmity toward God. While forsaking sin and seeking forgiveness therefrom may be the first step in repentance toward God, a step not needed by the sinless Jesus, yet positive conformity to God's righteousness was most certainly required of Jesus. Thus, it becomes most intelligible and quite proper that Jesus should feel personally impelled to submit to John's immersion. He publicly declared thereby His resolve to surrender His will to the will of God, and His renunciation of all sin. He did this, not in spite of His Sonship, but on account of it! He knew that He was the pure Son of God, but this was good reason for obeying God: as a pure Son. This purpose, personally felt by Jesus, will empower Him to face each assault of Satan, to remain humble before the applause of the multitudes, to remain calm before the confusion and misunderstandings of the disciples, to continue to love those most unlovely, and to lay down His scourged, hurting body upon the cross for our sins.

3. Our perpetual pattern. Out of that perfect union of Jesus' personal purpose with the paramount principle comes a perpetual pattern for us. Jesus was not baptized to give us an example that we should also be baptized. Rather, Jesus was baptized to give us an example of doing whatever God has commanded just because God had said to do it. If God commands US to be baptized, then we do that because He commanded and not because Jesus was baptized. In this case, we pour ourselves into Jesus' mold of perfect obedience to the Father in whatever He commands by doing just what God has specifically commanded us.

Nobody will ever formulate a better ethic than "doing all that God tells us to do." There is no better. Without God's revelation, men have such trashy ideals, and yet the whole human race descended from people who knew God (Ro. 1:18-32). Thus, all the wickedness of the world is due to departure from the knowledge of the will of God and willing obedience to it. Man cannot throw away or ignore what he knew of God's will and then expect to find a sure foundation for an ethic to take its place. In the case before us, John had preached God's will but many religious people rejected that message. Jesus could not. To please God, according to Jesus, is not to set aside anything God has commanded. In making no exception of Himself,

Jesus is saying that no excuse is good enough for not doing everything God requires. This is the true measure of *all righteousness*. (See Mt. 5:17)

John could not know of the authority of God possessed by Jesus, at least at that moment when he refused to baptize Him, so clearly as we can see from our vantage point. Thus he is not so culpable for this refusal. But, having been assured of Jesus' right to command, we must see that to argue with Jesus about the propriety of ANYTHING He requests, is sin!

4. The permission: *Then he permitted him*. Here John proves himself to be a true prophet by recognizing and obeying his true Master when that Master corrects his understanding. Jesus of Nazareth is not only far holier than John; He is also far wiser in the application of God's will. This is what John confesses in permitting Jesus to be baptized.

#### IV. THE PROMISED POWER

3:16 **When Jesus was baptized, he went up from the water.** Mark had specified that Jesus came to be baptized into (*eis*) the Jordan; hence, it is quite natural to assume that the phrase, *from the water*, is the logical movement of a person who had been in it. Though Matthew says "from" (*apo*), again it is Mark who is more specific: "out of" (*ek*). The prepositions by themselves are not sufficient to establish the conclusion that Jesus was immersed, but when they accord perfectly with the meaning of *baptizein*, "immerse," they become important circumstantial evidence to support that conclusion.

**The heavens were opened to him.** We are not told what was visible when the heavens were suddenly opened, nor even what constitutes such an opening in the heavens. From the physical nature of the heavens, as we know them, it may be said that the heavens are already open as far as the eyes of one standing at the Jordan River could see, and probably always have been. Therefore, perhaps what Matthew means is that to the physical, fleshly eyes of John and Jesus, at least, the normally invisible but thoroughly real spirit-world was made visible in a manner similar to the visions of that world seen by Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:1), Stephen (Ac. 7:56), Peter (Ac. 10:11), or John (Rev. 4:1). Note also Jesus' cryptic statement (Jn. 1:51). Matthew focuses all attention upon Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit, leaving the heavenly vision undescribed.

**unto him . . . he saw.** The "unto him" may or may not have been written by Matthew, as it has good manuscript authority both for and against it. (See SQE, p. 26) This phrase and the expression, "he saw," do not necessarily preclude all others from having seen the Spirit descend upon Jesus, and they must not be construed to exclude John. No doubt the Spirit was visible and the voice of God audible to all present. Some have understood Luke (3:21) to suggest that only Jesus and John now stood on the Jordan's bank, as the others would have left immediately after their baptism. However, that passage must be only a general statement concerning the major part of the crowds, since John also baptized others later (Jn. 3:23). Nor would it necessarily follow that they would have immediately departed after being baptized; rather, it is to be supposed that many remained to become regular "disciples of John." Thus, there were probably others still present.

*descending as a dove.* It may not be too important a problem to ask whether there really was a bird in the air that day. All four Gospels unite (cf. Jn. 1:32) in using this expression "as a dove" (*hos*, or *hosei peristeran*) with a common verb for descent (*katabaino*). Is it necessary to picture a real dove in this scene, any more than real fire on Pentecost (Ac. 2:3: "as fire," *hosei puros*)? Granted, there was a bodily form of some sort, but was it "dove-form," or did it merely "descend as a dove descends and lights upon" something? The fact that Luke places "in a bodily form" between "Holy Spirit" and "as a dove," does not settle the question, since, grammatically, it could stand anywhere in the sentence. The other Gospels make the phrase, "as a dove," modify either "descend" (Matthew and John) or "Holy Spirit" (Mark). Other commentaries seek for the meaning behind the symbol of the dove. If there were no bird, why bother? Mark (1:10) clarifies: "The Spirit as a dove came down into (*eis*) Him." How could a bird "enter" Jesus? But the Spirit of God in a bodily form could descend upon Jesus, even as swiftly and gracefully as a dove descends and lights, and enter into Jesus. Were there a real bird, the problem of "disposal of the body" arises just as this scene closes. Did the "bird" die right there? Disappear? Fly away? This is stretching a non-existent detail to its logical extreme. The all-important point is the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus.

**The Spirit of God descending.** Here is Jesus' promised power (Isa. 11:1ff) Jesus emerged from His baptism as the Messiah, designated, qualified and proclaimed so by God Himself. In this capacity He received the fullness of the Spirit for His work. (Cf. Ps. 45:7 with Heb. 1:9; Isa. 61:1 with Lk. 4:18) In His human nature which He had assumed in order to bring about our redemption, He received the Spirit (Jn. 3:34). As God, He needed nothing. It was only as the God-Man, or God in human flesh, that He needed such a gift of power as the Holy Spirit, and particularly so now, as He was ready to begin that great work for which He had come. This anointing by the Spirit does not mean that Jesus was not pure and holy before, or that He was not aware of His divine mission previously, or that He was not possessed of divine wisdom before this, for He was all this before His baptism. The coming of the Spirit performed these all-important functions:

1. The divine authentication of His identity: HE, and no other, is God's Son and Messiah;
2. His public anointing as God's Messiah (Ac. 10:38);
3. The reinforcement of the human nature of Jesus for the great work and suffering which He must shortly commence.

From this point on, we see Jesus led and empowered by the Holy Spirit as never before (Mt. 4:1; Mk. 1:12; Lk. 4:1, 14, 21; Mt. 12:18f; Lk. 10:21; Heb. 9:14; Ro. 1:4; 8:11).

## V. PATERNAL PLEASURE

**3:17 This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.** The silence of God is broken! No word from God had been heard since He spoke from heaven to Israel at Sinai. How significant that He should choose this moment to communicate directly with earth! And He shall speak again at Jesus' moment of glory (Mt. 17; Mk. 9:7; Lk. 9:35), and shortly before His hour of suffering (Jn. 12:28-30). Here is the word of Him who cannot lie, which proclaims who Jesus really is: "*my Son!*" On this point, what other witness in the universe would be so well-qualified to testify as the Father Himself? What other fact so worthy the honor of His personal sanction as this?

God's solemn declaration of Jesus as His Son meant the fulfillment of the great Davidic promise (Ps. 2:7; cf. Heb. 1:5; 5:5). God did not need to say, "This is my chosen Messiah," for every Jew

should have known that to declare Jesus as His Son was to declare Him the Messiah.

On this point, compare Mt. 26:63-66; Mk. 14:61-64; Lk. 22:66-71; note also Jn. 10:29-33 and the line of reasoning used by the Jews in their attacks upon Jesus. Compare Ps. 2 with the standard rabbinical interpretations of it, as noted by Edersheim, *Life*, II, 716: See also Heb. 1:5; II Sam. 7:14; Ps. 89:26, 27.

The verbal difference between the reporting of the voice of God, as quoted by Matthew and the quotation by Mark and Luke should be noted. Different attempts have been made to harmonize or explain the difference. One ancient suggestion, that made by the "Ebionite Gospel" (SQE, 27), represents God as speaking twice: once to Jesus, the other to John. There is no necessary contradiction between the differing Gospel accounts. God probably spoke only once, His words being recorded loosely by Matthew as they might have been quoted by John the Baptist, while Mark and Luke cite the words directly. In either case, the message is unchanged.

But it is not just to the world in general that God addresses Himself, but to Jesus: "You are my dearly beloved Son: I am pleased and proud of you!" How gratefully comforted the human heart of Jesus must have been to hear how perfectly "on course" He was sailing through that sea which is the human life. How much joy it must have brought Him to hear God recognize Him as His unique Son, and express His paternal pleasure for His public declaration of filial obedience to the Father's will.

Though the words of God seem to be a direct quotation of Ps. 2:7a, and quite possibly His words would call to the minds of any Jew present that particular Psalm, yet it is not necessary to assume that God was either merely quoting Scripture (as if the Gospel writers had put the words in God's mouth) or that God had in mind the second half of that verse: "This day have I begotten thee." The "Ebionite Gospel" cites these latter words at this point, as if they were actually pronounced upon this occasion, in the attempt to establish the Ebionite doctrine that God adopted the human Jesus on the day of His baptism. It has been the temptation of not a few heretic sects to assume that the nature of God came upon and entered to take control of the human nature of Jesus that day. But to prove this "adoptionist doctrine," they must ignore all of the relevant facts



related to Mary by the angel (Lk. 1:26-38), or those explanations given to Joseph (Mt. 1:18-23) regarding the true nature of the yet-unborn Baby, as well as the self-awareness of Jesus at age twelve (Lk. 2:49). "This day" (Ps. 2:7) is to be understood as referring to Jesus' resurrection also, not merely to His baptism, if at all (Ac. 13:33; cf. Ro. 1:4). Further, the words of God, in the second phrase, "*my Beloved, in whom I am well pleased*," more closely parallel Isa. 42:1 with the slight change from "servant" to "Son." To feel the force of this prophecy, it should be read in the Greek of Mt. 12:18. The point is this: by what He says, God is not making or constituting Jesus as His Son; rather, He is declaring publicly what was already true from the moment of Jesus' conception in the virgin mother. An identity card and a special anointing do not change the nature of the Person, although they verify or guarantee the nature of the relationship thus declared. By His anointing with the Holy Spirit and by the Father's proclaiming His Sonship, Jesus is thus revealed to the nation and the world as fully equipped and duly authorized to accomplish that for which He had come to earth.

Here at the baptism of Jesus, we have one of the clearest and most complete revelations of the three Persons who make up the Deity: the Son of God standing incarnate upon earth, the Spirit descending out of heaven, and the Father speaking from heaven. Again, our obedience to the divine will brings together those mighty names in connection with our baptism (Mt. 28:19).

## FACT QUESTIONS

1. Where did Jesus' baptism occur?
2. About how far did Jesus have to walk to get there?
3. When did it occur? That is, at what time in Jesus' life, and then, in relation to His ministry, when did it occur?
4. Why was Jesus baptized? List at least three reasons given in the Scriptures.
5. Why did John hesitate to baptize Jesus?
6. Cite any evidence that indicates whether Jesus was immersed, or had water sprinkled or poured upon Him. Is it possible to arrive at a secure conclusion which mode was used?
7. Did Jesus have to be baptized? If so, why? If not, why not?
8. How did Jesus' baptism differ from others, if it did?
9. What took place immediately following Jesus' baptism?

10. Who said, "It becometh us to fulfill all righteousness"? What did he mean?
11. Cite any evidence that would indicate whether any others than John and Jesus heard and saw the accompanying signs from heaven.
12. What was Jesus doing just as He was baptized?
13. Was there a real dove which descended and alighted upon Jesus? What are your grounds for deciding this? Does it make any difference either way?
14. Whose word are we taking for the extraordinary sights and sounds that occurred that day? Does it make any difference about whether we believe that it actually occurred or not?
15. What did the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus mean to John?
16. What did it mean to Jesus? Did Jesus really need any strengthening, help, encouragement or power, such as the Holy Spirit provides?
17. Is Jesus' baptism an example for us? If not, why not? If so, to what extent or in what way is it so?
18. What did God say about Jesus? What did He mean by that?

## EXPOSITORY SERMON CHAPTER THREE

### "THE MINISTRY OF A MAN"

- I. THE MAN'S MISSION: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness" (3:1-3)
  - A. The sudden appearance of John, who came thundering the message of God, broke the silence that Heaven had kept for over 400 years. John was the last of the greatest prophets (Mt. 11:11, 13). He was a likely candidate for the Messiahship (Lk. 3:15), or at least most commoners were convinced he was a prophet (Lk. 20:6). He performed no miracles (Jn. 10:40, 41) and claimed not to be the Christ (Ac. 13:24, 25), but expected that his message should be received as the very voice of God.
  - B. John's responsibility is clearly that of preparing the hearts of an unprepared people, unprepared for their Messiah's soon arrival. This is the first clue to the true nature of Christ's kingdom: it must not be a matter of external, regal trappings, but of internal, real repenting.

C. John was a "voice" crying in the wilderness, not an echo of the popular slogans of his times. He was not a product of his age, but brought a message from God to his age.

II. THE MAN'S MANNER (3:4): Ascetic food and raiment akin to the austere life of Elijah, significant as they might have been, are nothing compared to the man himself:

A. His personal self-denial (Lk. 7:33).

B. His refusal to be great in the eyes of the world, even in the sight of his own intimate disciples (Jn. 3:25-30).

C. His fearlessness to denounce evil wherever he found it.

1. Herod trembled before this courageous man who did not hesitate to point the finger of divine judgment at Herod's evil and unlawful marriage and say, "It is not lawful for you to have her!" (Mt. 14:4; Mk. 6:18-20), even if this meant imprisonment and death (Mt. 4:12; 11:2-4; 14:2-10; Mk. 6:14-25).

2. The Sadducees and Pharisees, the leaders of orthodox religion, sunk in ritualistic formalism and infidelity, recoiled under the hammer-blows of this fearless, peerless preaching.

3. The ordinary working people, whose lives were lived unaware of God's plainest commands, were brought to fruitful repentance! (Lk. 3:10-15)

III. THE MAN'S MESSAGE-OF MORALITY (3:5-10)

A. His message and baptism possessed the full authority of God (Mt. 21:25, 26, 32; Mk. 11:30-32; Lk. 3:2; 7:29, 30; Jn. 1:6)

B. His message concerned the most basic need of his hearers: repentance, not merely surface and immediate sorrow for sin, but a thorough-going and continuing repentance that changed the heart and all the life which flowed from the source.

C. In an age of rottenly luxuriant self-indulgence, John challenged men to a rigorous self-denial and a real communion with God, whether this meant fasting (Mt. 9:14; 11:18; Mk. 2:18; Lk. 7:33), or learning how really to pray (Lk. 11:1).

D. His preaching of repentance was intended to produce an open, immediate response:

1. Faith in the Christ who would immediately follow John (Jn. 1:7; Ac. 19:4)
2. But in preparation for His advent, the people must repent, confessing their sins, exhibiting a readiness to effect a radical change of life in conformity with the holiness of the coming Messiah Himself (Mt. 3:5, 6; Lk. 3:5-9)
3. "Baptism for the remission of sins" (Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3)

E. He aimed at the conscience.

- IV. THE MAN'S MASTER, THE MESSIAH (3:11, 12). For all of John's personal greatness derived from immediate communion with God, for all of the nation-shaking results he was achieving through his preaching, for all of the personal popularity in the select company of his disciples, he never lost sight of the one purpose he came to accomplish: to bear witness to the Light. John could not but focus men's attention on the majestic Messiah whose way he had come to prepare. John never forgot his place as the servant, unworthy even to unloose the Master's shoes. John ever obliterated himself in his message, and, with the coming of the promised Messiah, he was content to decrease in popularity, influence and religious leadership in favor of his Lord whose way he had so effectively prepared. (Jn. 3:30)

APPLICATION: Laboring within the terms of our commission (Mt. 28:19, 20), dare we give as much to our service to Jesus as did John? Do we seek only the glory of Christ? Are we as unhesitating in our rebuke of the sin of our age?

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Section 7

## JESUS IS TEMPTED BY THE DEVIL

(Parallels: Mark 1:12, 13; Luke 4:1-13)

TEXT: 4:1-11

1. Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil.
2. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he afterward hungered.
3. And the tempter came and said unto him, If thou art the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.
4. And he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.
5. Then the devil taketh him into the holy city; and he set him on the pinnacle of the temple,
6. and saith unto him, If thou art the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and, On their hands they shall bear thee up, Lest haply thou dash thy foot against a stone.
7. Jesus said unto him, Again it is written, Thou shalt not make trial of the Lord thy God.
8. Again, the devil taketh him unto an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them;
9. and he said unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me.
10. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.
11. Then the devil leaveth him; and behold, angels came and ministered unto him.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why was Jesus *led by the Holy Spirit* to be tempted?
- b. Why was it necessary for Jesus to be tempted in this way?
- c. Why was it necessary for Him to be tempted at this time?
- d. What was wrong with each of the devil's proposals?

- e. Do you think Jesus' temptations were like ours?
- f. Is there any way in which Jesus' temptations do not represent *all* our temptations?
- g. Do you think that Jesus really could have sinned? Why?
- h. How much control does the devil really have over the world?
- i. Can some attraction be a temptation to sin if you do not see the wrong in it?
- j. What do you think is the real secret of Jesus' power amidst the attacks of Satan?
- k. What is Matthew's apparent aim in bringing up Jesus' temptations? Or, what do the temptations prove about Jesus?
- l. How do you think the tempter "came to Jesus"? In person? Did he have a physical, visible body? Or did he communicate with Jesus by putting these suggestions into His mind? (Cf. Ac. 5:3)
- m. Do you think that the temptations of Jesus helped to develop His character or was the character that He already possessed merely tested by them, or both? Do temptations, as they are conquered or allowed to conquer, develop strength of character for good or for evil? Or, do they put to trial the character one already possesses?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Full of the Holy Spirit, Jesus returned from the Jordan and was immediately driven by the Spirit out into the wilderness to be put to the test by the devil. He was in the wilderness forty days, eating nothing. Afterward, when they were ended, He was starving. Further, during this period, His only companions were the wild animals of that area.

The tempter approached and said, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

Jesus answered, "It was once written and still stands: 'Man cannot live on bread alone: he must depend upon every word that God utters.'" (Dt. 8:3)

Next, the devil took Him to the holy city, Jerusalem, and causing Him to stand on the very highest ledge of the temple, said to Him, "If you are God's Son, throw yourself down from here, for you know what the Psalm (91:11, 12) says,

'He will give His angels charge of you to guard you,  
On their hands they will bear you up,  
Lest you should strike your foot against a stone.'"

"Yes," retorted Jesus, "but the Scripture also says (Dt. 6:16), 'You are not to put the Lord your God on trial.'"

The third time, Satan took Jesus to a very high mountain, and showing Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor in a moment of time, suggested, "I will give all this authority and glory to you, for it has been delivered unto me and I can give it to whom I choose. Now, if you will only fall down and worship me . . ."

But Jesus countered, "Get away from me, Satan! The Scripture still means what it said (Dt. 6:13), 'You shall worship the Lord your God and render service only to Him.'"

So when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Jesus, biding his time until another opportunity arose to tempt Him again. Then angels came and took care of Jesus.

## SUMMARY

The Spirit deliberately drove Jesus into the wilderness to be put to the test before the beginning of His ministry. Satan posed three deadly temptations: appetite, audacity and ambition. Jesus repulsed each with a perfect dependence upon God and His Word.

## NOTES

4:1 **Jesus was led up into the wilderness** from the scene of His baptism in the Jordan, which is below sea level, up to the rugged, desolate, barren highlands back of Jericho. The actual location of the temptations is unknown. During the forty days Jesus probably wandered a great deal. Inasmuch as the Jordan flows through a wilderness, the fact that Jesus was *led into* the wilderness must mean the deeper solitude of the rugged uninhabited region of the wilderness of Judea.

Only Jesus can be the original reporter of these trials which follow. It is not certain how He intends that we understand the account. Whether the temptations all took place in the wilderness, the three allurements being offered to the mind's eye of Jesus, or whether Jesus left the wilderness to appear first in Jerusalem and then on the summit of a high mountain, we cannot know. Were these temptations offered to Jesus through mental images suggested to Him by Satan while yet in the desert, or was He literally transported from place to place for temptation in the presence of the physical images of the situations offered by Satan? With their characteristic,

profound simplicity, the writers of the gospels narrate these inner conflicts of soul in story form, in order to render them accessible to all men. This is a real struggle, but how is it described?

1. Matthew and Luke both give the impression that they are narrating an event composed of actual facts just as they occurred.
2. However, they might be narrating a pictorial description through symbolic rather than literal facts. Foster (*Introduction*, 335) observes that the temptations might have been just as graphic and powerful if symbolic and presented from the depths of the wilderness.

While the first two temptations seem to be narrations of actual fact, the third temptation contains several elements that would require special interpretations if a literal view of the whole be taken. (See comments on 4:8)

**Into the wilderness.** Isolation from the "world" is no insulation against temptations. Jesus was placed in this ascetically perfect monastery of the badlands of Judea. His loneliness increased the power and pull of each desire. Beware of the temptation to desire escape from the desires of the world, since you will be taking them along into your isolated retreat. (See special study on *Desires*)

**Led by the Spirit.** The passive verb in no way expresses a human shrinking from the ordeal that lay ahead of Jesus. The popular translation of Mark 1:12 seem to suggest that Jesus was somehow "thrown out" into the desert against His own will, according to the most obvious etymological meaning of *ekballo* ("to throw out"). Yet, there is evidence that *ekballo* can also be used without the connotation of force (Cf. Mt. 9:38; Lk. 10:2; Jn. 10:4; Jas. 2:25; Ac. 16:37). Matthew and Luke use words (*ago* and *anago*) which signify simply "to lead, bring." Thus, rather than being reluctant to face the coming trials, Jesus willingly followed the Spirit's direction. The will of God is clearly seen in the fact that this mighty battle shall be waged at this time and not later in Jesus' ministry. Human wisdom might have postponed this encounter, because it was to be so decisive. But Jesus did not either shrink from the battle nor rashly seek to be tempted. Rather, He sought to be led by God's Spirit.

**To be tempted.** But why did the Spirit put Jesus in this position?



1. Jesus must be put to these extreme tests to develop that moral vigor and firmness that is only acquired through self-discipline under fire. (Cf. Heb. 2:9, 10; 5:8, 9) He must define for Himself and perfect those principles that would govern His ministry, those goals that He would always seek, those interests that would always control Him.
2. He must personally conquer Satan. It is impossible that Satan should not defend himself from the attacks of this One who is come to destroy everything that gave Satan control of this earth's peoples. He must become our Savior from sin by this great victory which reached its climax in His glorious resurrection.
3. He must learn personally the full power of human desires in order to sympathize perfectly with lost tempted men and save them. Only he who has felt all of a temptation's force and yet has stood firm can help those who have fallen. He must know fully what it is like to be a man, so as to qualify Himself to be our Priest and yet be our Sacrifice without blemish. (Cf. Heb. 2:9-18; Phil. 2:7, 8)
4. He must show His tempted followers how to overcome trials by His own impressive example. No apology need be made for Him! He has already faced our temptations and beaten them.

**By the devil.** Satan must have been fully aware of the impact of the outcome of this encounter: if he could vanquish Jesus, even by the smallest triumph conceivable, he could retain the world. But if he failed to subdue Him, then he must relinquish his sway over mankind and, trembling, await his final doom. Satan must have known also the demands of the perfect justice of God: Jesus must be an absolutely sinless sacrifice for sins. No marginal errors in the life of Jesus, once committed, could be corrected, offset or made good. The implication is inescapable that Satan knew that it would be possible for Jesus to sin. Thus, Satan was desperately determined to probe to the utmost this possibility for the moral corruption of God's Champion. The devil had laughed in God's face as, by one seduction or another, he had broken every man of God that had arisen since Adam. Before him now stood God's Best. "So this is God's Messiah? I broke the first Adam and his race; I'll break the Second at once!"

**4:2 He fasted forty days and forty nights.** Luke's terse comment, "He ate nothing," may emphasize an absolute abstinence from all food, or perhaps may be taken relatively to mean "He ate nothing but such as the desert provides, drinking water only." Compare similar expressions in Mt. 3:4 with Mt. 11:18; Lk. 7:33. An absolute and total abstinence from all food and all drink is not physically impossible (Ex. 34:28; I Kg. 19:8). Chronologically, these 40 days are wintry, cold and rainy. This is found by counting backward from the Passover in April, using the chronological notices in Jn. 1:29-43; 2:1-13. Fifty days to two months for the total calculation would push the time back to the beginning of February if not the end of January, depending upon whether the paschal moon occurred near the end of March or beginning of April. How these difficult weather conditions must have added to the Savior's suffering in the wilderness! It was a period perfectly adapted to try the durability of anyone's patient faith and physical endurance out in the wilds of that Judean wilderness. *He fasted.* There is no evidence that Jesus imposed upon Himself any unnecessary austerities. This fast is rather a necessity imposed by His situation in the wilderness, than a self-imposed observance of a law of fasting. (See notes on 6:16-18)

**Afterward he hungered.** He was so deeply engrossed in thought, prayer and planning of His short whirlwind ministry that lay ahead that He did not notice the effects of His fasting. Certainly, He felt normal hunger pains before; this is now starvation. The suggestion is made by some that the body of Jesus did not feel hunger of the forty-day fast until its conclusion, either because it was miraculously sustained during that period, or else because its power of endurance far exceeds ours since it was wholly unaffected by sin. Both views mistake both the nature of the body of Jesus and the will of God for His Son. God willed that Jesus should be made in every respect like mankind (Heb. 2:14, 17). To suppose special provisions and protections for Jesus is to create for Him that condition Satan desired: a compromise of His incarnation by using special means to sustain Himself. Further, moral freedom from sin does not give Jesus freedom from "the same nature" that man shares (Heb. 2:9, 10, 14, 17) or from "the likeness of sinful flesh" (Ro. 8:2).

What was Jesus doing during this forty-day period? Probably He was wrestling with the great problems He must soon resolve: How shall He, as God's Messiah, save a world that has fallen before Satan's enticements? Will He measure up to the great expectations

expressed by the Father at His baptism? How shall He perfect the plans of His heart? He knew the views and feelings of Israel, their expectations, their prejudices, their sins. If He submitted to the will of God by offering them a spiritual kingdom founded upon spiritual principles, He would have to stand practically alone against the whole nation. It would mean only helpless, hopeless suffering of all their misunderstandings, betrayals and their ultimate rejection. It would mean, finally, the lonely, bitter agonies of a cross. How could He hope to convince them? There are times when men must stop thinking and act; this is a time when Jesus must not act until He has thought through every move He must make. How often, after some great crisis in our experience, we regret that we made the move or said the words we did, or perhaps we see how the issue of that crisis could have been so much happier, had we reacted to it in some other fashion. So critical is every move, every speech, every attitude, that Jesus will have no room for misjudgment or error. Each day spent in that Judean desert only increased His sense of utter loneliness as He foresaw how difficult it would be to train those few disciples whose minds would be the most open. The seeming futility of such an endeavor as the proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom must have weighed down upon Jesus with oppressive force as He grew physically weaker. It was then that the tempter came.

## I. APPETITE

**4:3 The tempter came.** Since both Mark and Luke declare that during His fast, Jesus was being tempted (present participle: *peirazomenos*), it would seem that the three temptations narrated were either extended over that forty-day period, or else they are selected by Jesus as typical of the whole range of sinful suggestions offered Him. It could also indicate that, though He was being tempted over the entire period, the intensity of the allurements has just been stepped up. The devil came in person. The outcome of this struggle was to be so decisive, the stakes so high, he could entrust this attack to no lesser agent. He must permit no bungling, no excuses for failure.

**The Tempter:** we have just as much evidence for believing that he exists as an evil personality as we have evidence for a personal God, for our knowledge of their existence rests upon the same testimony, that of Jesus. If Jesus merely accommodated His words to the

popular error of "those unenlightened times," then what He reveals about God loses its value to declare otherwise unknowable truth, since this too might be mere accommodation to popular error. Jesus has left no way for His interpreters to know when He might have been accommodating and when He was revealing unadulterated truth. He claimed to be the very revelation of God Himself and, unless He be charged with dishonesty, ignorance or insanity, then His words are to be accepted as stating the actual case. Further, He did not merely "accommodate" for only one or two occasions (if, in fact, He ever did), for He had much to reveal about the spirit world over which Satan is chief. (See Mt. 12:22-29; 13:19, 38, 39; 25:41; Mk. 3:22; 4:15; Lk. 8:12; 10:18; 11:14-23; 13:16; 22:31; Jn. 8:44; 12:41; 13:2, 27; 14:30. Study also Ac. 5:3; 26:18; II Co. 2:11; 4:4; 11:14; 12:7; Eph. 2:2; 6:11; I Th. 2:9, 18; Jas. 4:7; I Pe. 5:8, 9; I Jn. 3:8, 10; Rev. 2:9; 3:9; 12:9; 20:2, 3, 8, 10.)

**If you are God's Son** could have two meanings, both of which serve the devil's purposes:

1. There was no doubt in Satan's mind but these words are intended to taunt Jesus, inciting Him to prostitute His divine powers to selfish purposes: "No doubt you ARE God's Son and thus equipped with miraculous powers that could at once feed your starving stomach. Admitted that you ARE His Beloved, are you not being unjustly deprived of something good? Should you, of all persons, suffer thus? And, YOU can do miracles! You could put an end to your present suffering and doubts about how to use your wonderful power. You will become the visible possessor of this power and the food will provide the strength to begin your life work." This is an invitation to doubt God's goodness and providential care.
2. There was no doubt in Satan's mind but these words are intended to incite doubt in Jesus: "Has God really said, 'You are my beloved Son,' and then left you to starve? Were you REALLY God's Son, as God seemed to suggest at your baptism, could such a Father be trusted who leaves His 'well-beloved' out here in the wilderness to die? If you had such powers worthy of such a Son as God would claim, then you could furnish me proof and at the same time satisfy that gnawing hunger!" Jesus could be tempted in this case to rebuke Satan by giving miraculous proof of His identity, but

to have done so would have resulted in obedience to Satan's sinful suggestion. This is the provocation to doubt God's truthfulness.

3. The possibility that Satan doubted Jesus' Sonship is not too likely, else he would not have staked so much upon the conquest of Jesus. It is more likely that Satan tempted Jesus so thoroughly because he knew exactly who He was.

At the very heart of this suggestion lies the problem of the very existence of Jesus: He was alone in the wilderness and about to starve to death. Surely He had come from heaven for greater purposes than to perish unknown right there in the desert suffering such torture. A man must live, it is said. Did not Jesus have the right to live, even if it meant to create food miraculously for the sustenance of His life?

4:4 **It is written!** Jesus' citations of Deuteronomy (6:13, 16; 8:3) demonstrate two tremendous conclusions:

1. Jesus Himself is choosing to control His desires by bringing them into subjection to the will of God as revealed in His Word (Study the implications of the truth as applied to life, Ro. 8)
2. Because Jesus is also God's Anointed, sent to reveal God's mind, His citation of Deuteronomy stamps the Pentateuch collection of the first five books of the Old Testament as the Word of God. Let those who are confused by the multitudinous and contradictory critical theories on the origin of those books hear the voice of Jesus!

Whatever the devil's meaning in his equivocal phrase, "If you are the Son of God," Jesus did not reply to it by direct demonstration of His identity either by miraculous proof that Satan had demanded or by enlightening debate sustaining the proposition, "I am God's Son." Rather, He reveals a more basic question involved, a problem that touches every man: "What is the true ground of man's being? Is it matter or spirit? Is it bread or the word of God? What really sustains man?" (Cf. Psa. 19:7-11; 119; Jn. 1:1-3; I Jn. 2:17; Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:1-3; cf. "word of God" in II Pet. 3:5, 7.) Jesus graphically declares the true foundation of man's being to be "anything God says."

If one is faced with the choice of a life compromised by sin, or a death for righteousness, he does not HAVE to live. A man may choose to starve to death, rather than steal food. On the anvil of this wilderness experience is hammered out Jesus' decision: "My food is to do the will of Him who sent me, and to accomplish His work." (Jn. 4:34) It is far better to starve for sake of a right principle than to eat food misappropriated.

Here Jesus was fighting like a dying man as our Champion who faced this very real battle at His very weakest. Yet, if He is to save others, Himself He cannot save. Self-denial is the rule of His kingdom. Yes, even the Son of God will live as every other man, without special provision. He will not make an exception for Himself, for doing so would have compromised the purpose of His incarnation. "He was made in all things like unto His brethren" for the specific purpose of "suffering being tempted" and to "help them that are tempted" (Heb. 2:17, 18; 4:15). Therefore, He never utilized supernatural power to alleviate His hunger, thirst, weariness, pain or grief.

If Satan suggested that Jesus, as God's Son, has a right to help Himself to miraculously-created bread, Jesus ignores this advice by revealing an even wider trust in God than that which one would expect in a miracle worker: "Man, any man and not merely God's Son, should trust God and live according to God's Word, rather than according to their fleshly needs. God knows my hunger and He is completely trustworthy to provide in His own way. He will not give me stones when I need loaves!" (Cf. Mt. 6:32; 7:9)

Further, Jesus depended upon His Bible for guidance, not upon special supernatural wisdom. He used the weapon against Satan, that is available to every man. (Cf. Eph. 6:17) Jesus had learned these Scriptures. Only because He had stored His memory full with them, meditated their meaning and related them to the practical problems of life—only because He had so thoroughly saturated Himself, in the same way in which any other man could learn God's Word, only thus did these texts come to Him "naturally." Here is written our condemnation: have we such a command of our Scriptures that we are able to expose Satan's lies for what they are? Do we live in such daily contact with the truth that the false is immediately exposed because of the contrast?

If Jesus had miraculous power, whence came it? To whom did He owe it? Since He depended upon the Father even for this power (Jn. 5:19-36), could the Father not be trusted for bread? Of course

He can. So Jesus will show the trust of any true son of God. Though it is not immediately apparent from the circumstances how God will provide the food, yet Jesus will wait and trust Him. The context of the OT passage, on which Jesus' resolute refusal depends, makes His words ring the more truly. Read the whole eighth chapter of Deuteronomy to appreciate the full impact of Jesus' answer.

Note that Jesus did not seek to change His circumstances. He could have wished that He had not been caught hungry, unknown and uncrowned. Rather, He dealt with the temptation exactly as it came to Him in that circumstance. It is yet another temptation to think when tempted that, were the circumstances different, the response would have been better. But the very purpose of God for letting men be tempted or tried is to produce men who will do God's will under whatever circumstance.

Whether this temptation is messianically symbolic or not, certain results with messianic implications would have followed from Jesus' surrender to it. Had Jesus used His miraculous power to satisfy Himself in this one case, it would have been much easier to use it thus to relieve some of the stresses, strains and painful moments of His ministry.

How do we face this same temptation under other forms? Are we ever tempted to use what is in our power for our own selfish ends? What about the money we have earned? Our talents? Exists there a church that has never said to itself, "I must build my cathedral before considering the needs for more evangelism, more Christian education and care for the old folks and orphans"? Or, lives there a Christian anywhere who, during some crisis, has never wondered, "Does God really know I exist, that I suffer thus? Does He really care?"

## II. AUDACITY

**4:5 Then the devil taketh him.** The verb "took" is probably to be understood in the same sense in which the Spirit "led" Jesus up from the Jordan, since the Greek verbs are the same in both cases.

Mt. 4:1 uses *anago*; Lk. 4:1, 5, 9 uses *ago* and *anago*, whereas in the parallel of Mt. 4:5, 8 *paralambano* is substituted without apparent change in meaning.

**Pinnacle of the temple in the holy city.** In Jerusalem the most imposing height offering the longest fall would be the southeast

corner of the temple court, a point which towered above the Kedron valley some 300-400 feet, depending upon where measurement was taken. Arndt-Gingrich define the word *pterugion* ("pinnacle") as the "tip, end, edge, extremity or summit of something." Edersheir<sup>1</sup> (*Life*, I, 244) describes a tower that was supposed to have been located on that corner, raising the height to 450 feet. Any point in the temple area so high that a fall from it would be fatal is probably all that is meant.

**4:6 Cast thyself down.** One feature of this temptation might not be so apparent to us upon first reading of the text, for the temptation to presumption lies most directly upon the surface and easy to see without reflection. This is so because of Jesus' reply to Satan. Yet, any precipice in the desert would have sufficed for the mere physical of leaping from the heights to be safely, gently landed upon the ground borne upon the hands of the angels. But why, then, *the temple's pinnacle*? Is the devil suggesting that the crowded courts or streets below would provide a fitting theatre onto which the Lord could leap to begin His marvelous ministry with a "sign from heaven" which would command the instant belief and loyal obedience of the Jews? Is he opening before Him the easy successes possible to a Superman, obscuring the lasting results that God sought through preaching, teaching and daily fellowship, however slow and difficult that latter way might be? If so, in succumbing to this suggestion, Jesus would be committing God to a course of action, forcing the Father to justify ever greater sensations, a course foredoomed to failure. Faith that would depend upon such signs is not the confident trust that God seeks.

If Satan is not placing before Jesus the allurements to descend, borne of angels into the midst of priests and people, but rather is trying to trap Jesus in His personal response to God, then this is a temptation to fanatic presumption. Satan could well know how prone human nature is to go to opposite extremes. Jesus had just demonstrated so beautiful a trust in the heavenly Father in answer to the first temptation, that the tempter now takes advantage of this human proneness to extremes by suggesting, "All right, if you are going to trust God so much, show your faith by something more spectacular, more decisive than mere patient hunger! Put some specific promise of God to some clear-cut test. Psalm 91:11, 12 promises you God's protection for just such a case as this. So throw yourself down from



this dizzy height to the solid rock below! By so doing, you can demonstrate your unquestioning faith in God, and show yourself to be the Messiah to those who see this thrilling sign from heaven!"

What would be more justifiable than such a leap? Yet, Jesus' answer reveals the fallacy. The urge to hazard His life merely to prove His trust in God and demonstrate His Sonship, would really have meant to doubt God's express declaration and presumptuously to put God on trial. Such a trial is the more presumptuous because God had already proved often enough that He keeps His Word. The devil's suggestion deliberately obscures the weightier question whether God must yield to every unreasonable whim of those fanatics who, while protesting faith in God, demonstrate practical disbelief of His declarations by putting Him to a test.

**He shall give His angels charge concerning thee.** The Psalm (91:11, 12) that Satan quotes, when read in its entirety, fits the situation quite exactly. The whole Psalm depicts the security against various dangers, that is enjoyed by the man who trusts God. Hence, it applies to any son of God. Satan has merely invented a particular test to which God's general promise may be put to see if He will keep His Word. The deception does not rest in a supposed misquotation of the verses by Satan (he left out "to keep thee in all thy ways"), because Jesus accepted the quotation as being substantially correct. The Psalm, however, does not teach that man may choose the path nor may he command God to act by rescuing him from the extremes of man's follies. Rather, it means that in faith man must follow God, letting God be God. In this latter frame of reference, man will enjoy the blessed security of God's providence. The trap is hidden in the phrase "to see if He will keep His word . . ."

**4:7 Thou shalt not make trial of the Lord thy God.** Again Jesus shows that He will not run before God, but chooses rather to be led by Him. He clearly will not, of His own choice, create unnecessary dangers, but will avoid them unless they fall in the path of obedience to the Father's will. He shows Himself to be a man of common sense, true sanity and genuine wisdom. Neither will He seek to place God under obligation to back His plans for His ministry. Though Satan had made it appear otherwise, it took more trust in God NOT to leap than to do so. Jesus answers simply, "Testing is not trusting."

Study the disappointing but enlightening history of Israel for its examples of those who made trial of God: Ex. 14:10-12; 16:3; 17:1-7; Num. 14:1-11; 21:4, 5. Compare the divine commentary on these examples, offered in I Cor. 10:6-11 and Heb. 3:1—4:11. Testing God not only involves disbelief of His promises but also may involve disobedience to His specific commands not to make trial of Him. The end result may be open rebellion. Falsifying in money matters is one way to try God (Ac. 5:3, 4, 9). Changing the basis of salvation is called by Peter "putting God on trial" (Ac. 15:10).

This question of forcing God to back up His Servant Jesus will come up again in Jesus' ministry, suggested by the impudent challenges of the Jews, demanding that He "show a sign from heaven." (Mt. 12:38f; Lk. 11:16; Mt. 16:1-4) In their presence He could have called upon God to perform stupendous feats in nature. Hanging on the cross, He would have occasion to remember this moment, for other voices would jeer, "He trusts in God; let God deliver Him now, if He desires Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God.'" (Mt. 27:43)

Again, Jesus demonstrated that He knew His Bible. He corrected a common misuse of God's promises by showing that the interpretation of those promises, which was offered by Satan, contradicted the clear command of God. (Dt. 6:16)

### III. AMBITION

**4:8 exceeding high mountain.** If a literal view of these temptations be taken, this verse contains several elements that would require special interpretation:

1. **An exceeding high mountain.** Supernatural vision must be assumed, since no known mountain peak however high could provide such a literal panorama as the Evangelists describe.
2. **He showed Him all the kingdoms of the world.** If all the world's kingdoms be taken in its absolute sense, some special vision is required. However, if it be taken in a relative sense to include only those visible to the naked eye as representative of all, then it is possible to take a literal view of the text, since vast panoramic views are afforded by a number of Palestinian peaks.

3. **And the glory of them.** This is a quality of those kingdoms not visible to any normal, naked eye; hence, the phrase must imply a miraculous, if not a mental, vision.
4. Luke adds "**in a moment of time**" (4:5), apparently compressing the extent of such a vision into a few minutes.

There is no difficulty in assuming that Jesus had supernatural vision to see all that Satan offered or in assuming that Satan drew word pictures of all the world's kingdoms and their glories, because, as a matter of fact, the Evangelists do not tell how "he showed Him all the kingdoms of the world."

**4:9 All these things will I give thee.** Since Satan offered Jesus "kingdoms," he must have known what question was keenly before His mind: how He would establish the kingdom of God. This fact made Jesus a particularly clear target for this attack. Note that the phrase, "If you are God's Son," is missing. Even to have mentioned Jesus' Sonship at this time would not have served the devil's purposes to make Him relax His grip on the Father in order to worship the tempter.

Satan is desperately laying his trap, "If Jesus is really a man of faith and common sense, surely He will take the shortest, most direct route to that universal control He is seeking. If I can just maneuver His natural desire for power and the normal wish to avoid difficulty and suffering, perhaps I can make him an offer He cannot refuse." Turning to Jesus, the tempter spoke, "Look, Jesus, look! What do you see? You see the *grandeur* of a thousand kingdoms passing before your eyes. Look at that uncounted wealth and stunning beauty! It could be yours. Do you hear those sounds? They are the tramping feet of soldiers marching at your command. It is the busy hum of commerce and industry creating new wealth to pour at your feet in tribute, It is the shout of lusty voices proclaiming you universal ruler of the earth. As the prince of this world, I am in a position to offer you all this!"

How much control does the devil really hold over the world? If Jesus knew that Satan were lying, then this would have been no great temptation. It is worthy of note that He did not call Satan a liar for saying that these kingdoms were his to give. However, if he is telling the truth, then the ambitions of Jesus could be realized in an instant and the "inevitable" cross could be avoided.

As stated, this was an apparently rational offer and a very desirable proposal. The kingdom of Satan is no figure of speech, because the Gospels contain constant reference to the power of Satan in the world as a reign opposed to God. (Cf. Mt. 12:25-28; Lk. 11:17; see also Mt. 6:13; 13:19, 25, 39; 25:41; Lk. 10:18; 22:3, 28, 31; Jn. 8:44; 12:31; 13:27; 14:30; 16:11.) Satan speaks as if he were the *rightful* ruler in *complete* control of the whole world (Lk. 4:6). This is certainly false, because the fact that he so persistently seeks to tempt and master men proves that he does not yet completely possess them. Further, whatever authority he may possess is by usurpation.

Humanly speaking, Jesus needed everything that the devil was offering. He had no reputation, no formal religious education or degrees from accredited universities, no powerful friends who could exert their influence in His favor in a world where men advance their causes by treading upon each other. Yet, He is contemplating the advancing of His Father's rule by spiritual methods and by the conversion of single individuals to His message of ideals. He well understood that this latter approach would be the slowest, most difficult, most discouraging and finally the most disappointing of the two choices.

Assuming that Satan is telling the truth, how could he really give all the human kingdoms to Jesus? Simply by fulfilling all of the most common Jewish conceptions of the messianic kingdom! Satan could rally the entire Jewish nation around Jesus, restore to Him the throne and glory of David, force the nations to bring all their wealth to Jerusalem and put every Jew on state payrolls. How often the echo of Satan's whisper was heard! (Mt. 16:22; Lk. 22:49(?); Jn. 6:14, 15; 7:3, 4; 12:32-34; 18:36; Ac. 1:6) Jesus could forget the hardships, the confusion, the rejection, the cross, and He could so much more simply establish His world dominion.

**If you will fall down and worship me.** These are Satan's terms. He chooses his words carefully, because upon them depends his ultimate success. Satan is neither ignorant nor stupid. He knows that worship basically involves the acknowledgement of him as true lord and rightful disposer of kingdoms. If he can entice Jesus into admitting His dependence upon him rather than God, then he will have tricked Jesus into transgressing the most basic commandment known (Dt. 5:7-9; 6:4, 13) To the western ear, the word "worship" would immediately have warned of the idolatry involved. But Satan uses a general word (*proskuneo*, see note on 2:2) that may suggest

no more than the obeisance rendered by an inferior to a superior among men. If only "worship as if offered only to God" were meant, Jesus would have immediately drawn back in holy horror with the result that, for Jesus, all of the enticement would be stricken from the temptation merely by stating it. Admittedly, Satan's choice of words is admirable, because of the ambiguity.

By putting in the condition which demanded at least oriental obeisance, Satan subtly presses Jesus for a compromise. Perhaps he intends the compromising of Jesus' ideal of "a kingdom not of this world" in favor of a worldly kingdom. Jesus could still rule the world by using Satan's methods: war, political intrigues, brute force. Satan presents this attractive offer as a real, immediate victory for Jesus, when in reality it would have been His real surrender. The transfer would be only an illusion. It is that old perennial lie: "You may be your own king, do as you please, as long as you are my servant!"

But has there ever existed a church or a Christian which has not surrendered to Satan Jesus' ideal, "the kingdom of God," for a greater share of the control of the world's kingdoms? Who has not, at one time or another, mistaken might for right and regimentation for regeneration? How often has ambition to rule conquered those who have conquered all else!

4:10 High above this moving scene of glory and beauty which Satan paints before the eyes of Jesus, the Son of God can see another vision: the Kingdom of God in which men of every tribe, people, nation and tongue come streaming from afar, bringing all their wealth, glory, praise and service to lay them down in humble worship at His feet. He can see the day of His coronation at His Father's right hand, enthroned to reign until all His enemies should be made the footstool of His feet, until every tongue confess to the glory of God that Jesus Christ is Lord! God had already promised His Son universal world control (Psa. 2:7-12). The offer of Satan is exposed for what it really is: a tarnishing glitter, a crumbling pile of stones, dying men, ashes and dust.

**Get thee hence, Satan.** This practical expression of idolatry that Satan has offered Jesus is too much. Satan has lost. He has no more to offer the Master. Jesus' shout clarifies the issues: "Satan, the end never justifies the means. The kingdom that I desire has at its very heart the bringing of worship only to the Lord God, not the

crowning of your original rebellion. I cannot divide my allegiance nor compromise God's will even as a means to a holy end, for to do so would contaminate the result. Therefore, the means of establishing my kingdom must also be holy: teaching men to worship and serve only God!" From this moment, the victory cry will continue to ring down through time, "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world!" (Jn. 16:33)

4:11 **Then the devil leaveth him**, baffled and disappointed. Satan is not invincible. This smashing victory of Jesus and all the battles won by those who dare use Jesus' methods prove it. (I Co. 10:13; Eph. 6:10-18; I Pet. 5:8, 9) The conquest of Satan in these three temptations does not mean that Jesus was tempted by all possible temptations, for temptations come in infinite variations. But He was tempted at all points at which temptation can touch a soul. This is one of the world's greatest moments. It has just been proved that one human being, reduced to his weakest physical extremity and seduced by Satan's deadliest suggestions, by sheer trust in God, by unhesitating refusals and by unrelenting reliance upon God's revelation, could resist temptation and refuse to sin. Jesus has just shown that it was possible for all men not to sin.

Luke notes (4:13) that the devil departed until other opportunities should present themselves for further attack. Further temptations came later (Mk. 1:32-39; Jn. 6:14, 15; Mt. 16:23; Lk. 22:28; Mt. 27:40-43).

**Angels came and ministered unto him.** He who would not have Satan's satellites as His servants, is now served by God's servants. (Mt. 26:53; Jn. 1:51; Heb. 1:6-14; cf. I Kg. 19:5ff) If they brought Him food, then His faith, which trusted God to the limit, is further justified in this significant way. (Cf. 4:3, 4)

## FACT QUESTIONS

1. List the temptations of Jesus, noting the differences in the various Gospel reports.
2. Tell why Jesus was tempted at each point, noting to what human characteristics Satan made his appeal each time.
3. How did Jesus meet each temptation? Be specific about each one.
4. What do Jesus' temptations mean to us?
5. Is there any connection between the temptations of Jesus and what was said about Him at the time of His baptism?

6. Why did Jesus go out into the wilderness?
7. What wilderness was it?
8. What was the Holy Spirit's purpose in taking Jesus there?
9. Why was not Jesus hungry until after the fast? (Cf. 4:2)
10. How could Satan have shown Jesus all of the world's kingdoms?
11. Explain what is meant by "tempting God."
12. Did the world's kingdoms really belong to Satan?
13. Did the temptations have any relation to Jesus' world mission?  
If so, what relationship?
14. What is the relationship between knowing the Word and will of God and resisting temptations?
15. What does Jesus' use of the OT as the final authority for His actions reveal about:
  - a. The OT as the progressive revelation given by God to a particular people?
  - b. the application of the Bible in general to particular problems faced by the believer?
16. What are temptations? Wherein does their real power lie? Can they always be recognized? If so, under what circumstances? If not, why not? Why should we pray to avoid temptations (Mt. 6:13)? Why does God allow His Son and His children to be tempted? Is something a temptation if one cannot see the wrong in it?

### SPECIAL STUDY: TEMPTATION

#### I. THE LORD'S LIABILITY TO ALLUREMENT.

A. *Could Jesus be tempted so as to sin?* Yes must be the unequivocal response, because His incarnation necessitates it. If we are to believe that Jesus was to be tempted in *all* respects in which a human being is tempted (Heb. 4:15), then we are led to the realization that His subjection to every sort of human seduction must have begun long before the period forty days after His baptism. His birth was unique and miraculous, but His youth was normal in the human environment of Nazareth. His adult life indeed was marvelous, one-of-a-kind, yet fully human. It must be ever remembered that the Word was God before He became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn. 1:1-14), but that fact must never be made to cast doubt upon the reality of the flesh in which He dwelt (Heb. 2:14). With the Father He shares these characteristics: