Matthew 3

Between Two Voices

Key Verse

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Matthew 3:2

Big Idea

The arrival of the King calls for more than religious identity or religious words. John calls for repentance that produces fruit, and heaven itself identifies Yeshua as God's beloved Son. The question is no longer simply, “Is the King coming?” The King is here. How will we respond?

Introduction

Nearly thirty years have passed since the events of Matthew 2. Yeshua has grown up in Nazareth, but Matthew tells us almost nothing about those years. When the story resumes, Yeshua is not the first person we meet. Instead, we find an unusual Jewish prophet preaching in the wilderness, calling Israel to repentance and announcing that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. John is preparing the way for the King.

Matthew 3 is a chapter of preparation and identification. John tells Israel to get ready. Religious pedigree will not be enough; repentance must produce fruit. John insists that Someone far greater is coming after him, One who will immerse with the Holy Spirit and fire. Then Yeshua Himself arrives at the Jordan. The chapter that begins with a voice crying in the wilderness ends with a voice from heaven: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased” (Matthew 3:17).

Matthew introduces John the Baptist as the prophetic herald preparing Israel for the arrival of her King. John's message is simple and urgent: repent, because the kingdom of heaven is at hand. His appearance recalls Elijah, his ministry fulfills Isaiah's picture of a voice in the wilderness, and his immersion calls Jewish people to demonstrate repentance rather than depend upon ancestry or religious standing. John warns of coming judgment while promising that the One who follows him will be far greater than he is. Yeshua then comes to John for baptism, not because He has sins to confess, but in obedience to the Father's purpose and in identification with His people. As He comes out of the water, the Spirit descends upon Him and the Father speaks from heaven. Matthew leaves us in no doubt about the identity of the One for whom John has prepared the way. The King has arrived.

Opening Prayer

As I read this chapter, help me hear John's call to prepare the way for the King. Keep me from trusting in my background, my knowledge, or the religious labels I carry. Show me where repentance is needed and help that repentance to produce fruit in the way I live.

And as Yeshua steps into the Jordan, help me see Him as Matthew wants me to see Him: Israel's Messiah, Your beloved Son, and the King for whom the way has been prepared. Give me ears to hear Your voice and a heart ready to respond. Amen.

Commentary

Thirty Years of Silence (Matthew 3:1)

Matthew moves quickly. At the end of chapter 2, Yeshua is a young child living quietly in Nazareth. When chapter 3 opens, roughly thirty years have passed. Matthew tells us nothing about His childhood, His education, His work, or those early adult years. That silence has proved irresistible to some people. Over the centuries all sorts of stories have arisen about those missing years. According to those stories, Yeshua supposedly traveled to India. He studied mysticism. He learned secret wisdom somewhere and eventually brought it back to Israel.

Life Application

But I've often said that when the Bible is silent, we should be silent too. If it doesn't tell us, then we don't know. There is no need to fill in the blanks. In these days of instant information from a computer or smartphone, there is something healthy about living with wonder and even with ignorance—that is, simply admitting that we don't know. Let your imagination loose, certainly, and allow your mind to have the freedom of the non-answer. Theologians as well as scientists and all of us do well to admit ignorance and let things rest there. Wonder matters; it’s healthy.

Luke gives us one simple sentence: Yeshua “kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men” (Luke 2:52). That's enough. For nearly thirty years, life apparently went on without anything Matthew considers necessary for us to know. And then the time came. Matthew's concern is not with the silent years but with the arrival of the King. Yet before the King speaks a single recorded word in this Gospel, another voice is heard.

The Voice in the Wilderness: Herald of the King (Matthew 3:1–3)

“Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’” (Matthew 3:1–2). Matthew introduces John without much biography. He doesn't tell us about John's birth or upbringing. His interest is in what John has come to do. John is the herald of the King.

In the ancient world, a king did not simply arrive unannounced. Someone went ahead of him. The herald announced that the king was coming and called the people to get ready. That's John's job. He is not the center of the story. In fact, everything about his ministry points away from himself and toward the One who is coming.

His message could hardly be shorter: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). Get ready. The King is coming. And if the King is coming, the kingdom is coming with Him. Wherever the King is, that's where the kingdom is. John isn't announcing a new religious organization or inviting people to adopt a new philosophy. He is announcing that God's promised rule is drawing near because God's promised King is drawing near. That is why repentance cannot wait.

For many readers, repent sounds like a very Christian word. It is much older. The call to turn back to God runs throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. The prophets repeatedly called Israel away from sin and back to covenant faithfulness. Repentance is more than saying, “I'm sorry.” It means turning around spiritually. A changed mind produces a changed direction.

John is therefore thoroughly Jewish and thoroughly prophetic. He stands in the wilderness calling Israel to turn around because something momentous is about to happen. Matthew tells us exactly how to understand him: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight!’” (Matthew 3:3). Matthew is quoting Isaiah 40:3. In Isaiah, the picture is enormous: a highway is being prepared for God. Valleys are lifted, mountains brought low, rough ground made smooth. The imagery is of preparing a royal road for the arrival of the King. But John isn't out in the Judean wilderness with a shovel and a road crew.

The road being prepared is in people.

Pride must come down. Crooked things must be straightened. Obstacles must be removed. Repentance prepares the road for the King.

Jewish Insight

There is something particularly striking in Matthew's use of Isaiah here. Isaiah speaks of preparing “a highway for our God” (Isaiah 40:3), while Matthew applies that passage to the ministry preparing the way for Yeshua. Matthew doesn't stop and give us a theological lecture about what that means. He simply puts the texts together and expects us to notice.

The One for whom John prepares the way is no ordinary king.

An Odd Prophet in an Odd Place (Matthew 3:4–6)

John's message was unusual enough, but Matthew also wants us to notice the man himself. “Now John himself had a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey” (Matthew 3:4). He must have been quite a sight. Nothing about John suggests that he was trying to make himself attractive to the crowds, but to a

Jewish reader his clothing would sound familiar. Elijah is described as wearing a hairy garment with a leather belt around his waist (2 Kings 1:8). Matthew does not have to stop and explain the connection. The description itself places John in the prophetic tradition of Elijah.

John is also preaching in the wilderness rather than in Jerusalem. If you wanted to launch an important religious movement, Jerusalem would seem the obvious place. The Temple was there. The priests and the teachers, in fact, all the religious power was there. John begins on the fringe, yet the people come to him. Matthew tells us that Jerusalem, Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to hear him, confessing their sins and being immersed in the Jordan River (Matthew 3:5–6). His "all" does not mean every individual person in Judea made the trip; the point is that John's ministry was attracting widespread attention. People were leaving the religious center and going into the wilderness to hear a prophet tell them to repent.

There is another Jewish element here that we should not miss. Immersion in water was not something John invented. Ritual washing was already part of Jewish life from the time of the giving of the Torah. And eventually immersion was one of the final actions required for a Gentile to convert and become a Jew. What is striking is that John is calling Jewish people themselves into the water as an expression of repentance. His location at the Jordan also carries the echoes of Israel's story. Israel had once crossed the Jordan to enter the land, and now Jewish people are returning to that same region to prepare themselves for the coming of their King. We do not need to force every detail into a symbolic scheme, but wilderness, Jordan, immersion, and a prophet dressed like Elijah would hardly have sounded accidental to Matthew's Jewish readers.

Being Jewish Is Not Enough (Matthew 3:7–10)

The mood changes when John sees Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism. "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matthew 3:7–8). This is hardly the language of someone trying to build attendance at the next meeting. John is a prophet, and prophets were not primarily concerned with making people comfortable. His language is deliberately confrontational because he is dealing with something more dangerous than obvious rebellion: religious confidence without repentance. These people know the Scriptures, belong to the covenant people, and can trace their ancestry back through generations of Jewish history. None of that is wrong. The problem comes when privilege becomes presumption.

John goes directly after that presumption: "Do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'" (Matthew 3:9). For a Jewish person, Abraham is not just another ancestor. He is Avraham Avinu—Abraham our father—the man with whom God established His covenant and through whom He promised blessing to his descendants and ultimately to the nations (Genesis 12:1–3; 17:1–8). There is enormous privilege in belonging to that story, and John does not deny it. But being descended from Abraham cannot become a

get-out-of-jail card. “I'm Jewish” is not an answer to the call to repent. Covenant privilege brings covenant responsibility. John's point is not that Jewish identity means nothing. His point is that Jewish identity cannot substitute for a right response to God.

Jewish Insight

There is a wonderful connection here with what Matthew has already shown us. Chapter 1 begins with yichus—pedigree, family line, who you come from. Matthew carefully establishes Yeshua's yichus, tracing Him through David all the way back to Abraham. But that same genealogy contained some rather surprising people. It showed us that God has always been at work through people whose lives and backgrounds do not fit neatly onto a religious pedestal. Now John stands at the Jordan and warns his fellow Jews not to trust in their own yichus. Having Abraham in the family tree is a privilege, but it is not enough.

Then John makes the point almost outrageous: “For I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham” (Matthew 3:9). God is not trapped by our pedigrees. Abraham himself did not begin with an impressive Jewish ancestry; Abraham is where that particular family story begins. God called him, Abraham responded in faith, and God made of him a great nation. So John's hearers cannot turn God's gracious choice into a reason for spiritual complacency. The God who called Abraham can accomplish His purposes without anyone being able to say, “He has to use me because of who I am.”

Life Application

Religious pedigree is still a tempting place to hide. “I'm Jewish.” “I grew up in church.” “My parents were believers.” “I've been studying the Bible for forty years.” “I teach Sunday school.” “I'm ordained.” All of those things may tell us something important about someone's history, but none of them answers John's question. Where is the fruit? Repentance is not demonstrated by the labels we carry or the family from which we come. John says it ought to become visible in the way we live. In the previous chapter, we saw that our response to the King is revealed by considerably more than our words. John now says much the same thing another way: “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matthew 3:8).

And John immediately raises the stakes. “The axe is already laid at the root of the trees” (Matthew 3:10). The picture is not of a woodsman somewhere in the distance walking toward the orchard. The axe is already there. The time for relying on ancestry, reputation, or religious standing is over. The King is coming, and His arrival means that what is genuine and what is merely outward will be exposed. John's message contains hope because repentance is still possible, but there is urgency in it as well. “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matthew 3:10). The herald who announces the coming King is also warning Israel that the coming of the King demands a response. The Jewish prophets repeatedly sounded a similar warning to our people.

The One Who Comes After John (Matthew 3:11–12)

John knows that his ministry is temporary. He has gathered crowds, called Israel to repentance and immersed those who confess their sins, but he refuses to let anyone mistake the herald for the King. “As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals” (Matthew 3:11). John has an extraordinary ministry, yet his greatness lies partly in knowing that the story is not about him. Even the task of removing another person's sandals belonged to a servant, and John says that when compared with the Coming One, he is not worthy even of that. There is no false modesty here. John understands the enormous difference between the one preparing the road and the One who is coming down it.

The difference is also revealed in what each one does. John immerses in water for repentance, but the Coming One “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matthew 3:11). To Jewish ears, the promise of God's Spirit would carry considerable weight. Israel's prophets had looked forward to a day when God would pour out His Spirit upon His people. Isaiah spoke of God pouring His Spirit upon Israel's descendants (Isaiah 44:3), Ezekiel promised a new heart and God's Spirit within His people (Ezekiel 36:25–27), and Joel foresaw the day when God would pour out His Spirit on all flesh (Joel 2:28–29). John is saying that the One coming after him will do something John cannot possibly do. John can put people into water. The Messiah can immerse people in the Spirit of God.

We need to be careful, however, not to separate “fire” from its immediate setting. It is tempting to hear “Holy Spirit and fire” and jump ahead to the tongues like fire at Shavuot in Acts 2, but Matthew has surrounded this statement with the language of judgment. The tree that bears no good fruit is thrown into the fire (Matthew 3:10), and in John's very next sentence the chaff is burned “with unquenchable fire” (Matthew 3:12). In this setting, fire seems to point primarily toward judgment rather than simply being another description of the blessing of the Spirit. The Coming One brings both. There is Spirit for those who belong to Him and judgment for those who reject His rule. John has been telling people that the King is coming; now he makes clear that the King's arrival is not a neutral event.

Wheat and Chaff (Matthew 3:12)

John reaches for an image that would have been immediately understood in an agricultural society: “His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matthew 3:12). Most of us who live in cities don't spend much time winnowing wheat, so the picture may need explaining. After grain had been harvested and threshed, it could be tossed into the air with a winnowing fork. The heavier grain fell back to the ground while the lighter chaff was blown away. What had grown together was separated. The useful grain was gathered; the worthless chaff was discarded and burned. John's point is not about ancient

farming techniques. It is about separation. The arrival of the King reveals what is wheat and what is chaff.

That theme is already beginning to sound familiar. In chapter 2, people responded very differently to the arrival of the King. Here in chapter 3, John says that the King Himself will ultimately separate what belongs to Him from what does not. There is an edge to John's preaching that we should not soften. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” is good news because the King has come near, but the coming of the King also means accountability. John is not trying to frighten people for the sake of frightening them. He is warning them while there is still opportunity to turn around. The axe is at the tree. The winnowing fork is in His hand. Now is the time to repent.

Life Application

We sometimes prefer the show of repentance without commensurate fruit, the Spirit without judgment, and a King who comforts us without ever challenging us. John will not give us that version of Messiah. His message is uncomfortable because repentance is uncomfortable. It requires more than admitting that something is wrong; it requires turning around and allowing that change to become visible. Yet John's warning is itself an expression of God's mercy. God warns because there is still time to respond. The herald is standing in the wilderness saying, in effect, Get ready. The King is coming.

And now, having spent twelve verses talking about the King who is coming, Matthew finally brings Him onto the scene:

“Then Yeshua arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him” (Matthew 3:13).

Why Is Yeshua Being Baptized? (Matthew 3:13–15)

There is an immediate problem. Everything John has said about his baptism connects it with repentance. People have been coming to him confessing their sins. John has demanded fruit consistent with repentance. Yet now Yeshua walks into the Jordan and asks to be baptized. What is He repenting of? Matthew gives us no suggestion that Yeshua has sin to confess, and John himself recognizes that something about this is backwards. He tries to prevent Him: “I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?” (Matthew 3:14). The man who has just said that he is unworthy even to remove the Coming One's sandals now finds that very One standing in front of him asking for baptism. No wonder John objects.

Yeshua's answer is important: “Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). He does not tell John that He needs repentance. He says that this is the right thing to do. It is fitting. It fulfills righteousness. David Stern renders the thought, “It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness,” while the point in our text remains that Yeshua willingly identifies Himself with what God is doing among His people. He does not stand safely on the riverbank watching sinful Israel go into the water. He steps into

the Jordan with them. Not because He shares their need for repentance, but because He has come to identify Himself fully with the people He has come to save.

Jewish Insight

There is something deeply Jewish happening here. In chapter 2 we saw Yeshua as the consummate Israel, retracing Israel's story when Matthew said, “Out of Egypt I called My Son” (Matthew 2:15). Now He stands in the Jordan. Israel had passed through water. Israel had crossed this river. Israel had been called God's son. And now Yeshua, God's Son and Israel's Messiah, stands in the waters of the Jordan identifying Himself with His people. We should be careful not to turn every geographical detail into an allegory, but Matthew has already taught us to see Yeshua's story in connection with Israel's story. That connection continues here.

There is also something important in the phrase “fulfill all righteousness.” In Matthew, righteousness is not merely an abstract theological idea; it is about doing what God requires and thus being right. I’ve used the term ‘rightness’ to amplify this. Yeshua is not being baptized because John has discovered sin in Him. He is submitting Himself to the Father's purpose. John objects because he understands the difference between himself and Yeshua. Yeshua insists because obedience to His Father is not optional. Once again Matthew is showing us something we began noticing with Joseph: faithfulness is demonstrated not merely by what a person says, but by what he does. Yeshua steps into the water.

The Heavens Open (Matthew 3:16–17)

“After being baptized, Yeshua came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened” (Matthew 3:16).

I love that picture. The heavens are opened. They are no longer shut. Something is about to be disclosed. Heaven is about to speak. The Spirit of God descends like a dove and comes upon Yeshua, and then a voice comes from heaven: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased” (Matthew 3:17). In one remarkable moment Matthew gives us the Son standing in the Jordan, the Spirit descending upon Him, and the Father speaking from heaven. We do not need to import a later theological vocabulary into the scene to make it impressive. Matthew simply shows us Father, Son and Holy Spirit together.

And the Father's words matter. “This is My beloved Son” recalls Psalm 2, where God's anointed King is addressed as His Son (Psalm 2:7). “In whom I am well-pleased” recalls Isaiah's servant: “My Chosen One in whom My soul delights” (Isaiah 42:1). King and Servant come together in the words spoken over Yeshua. He is the royal Son, and He is also the Servant in whom God delights. Matthew is continuing to tell us who this King is before Yeshua has preached a sermon, healed a sick person, or performed a miracle.

Jewish Insight

There is another expression worth noticing. A voice coming from heaven became known in later Jewish tradition as a bat kol, literally a “daughter of a voice,” a heavenly voice communicating God's will. We should not impose later rabbinic terminology upon Matthew, but the Jewish idea helps us appreciate the scene. Heaven itself bears witness to Yeshua. John has testified that Someone greater is coming. Now the Father identifies Him.

The chapter began with a voice crying in the wilderness. It ends with a voice from heaven. John's voice says, “Prepare the way.” The Father's voice says, “This is My beloved Son.”

And between those two voices stands Yeshua, the King for whom the way has been prepared.

Takeaways

The arrival of the King calls for repentance that produces fruit.

Religious identity and religious knowledge cannot substitute for a right response to God.

Covenant privilege brings covenant responsibility.

John’s greatness includes knowing that the story is not about him; he points beyond himself to Yeshua.

The Coming One brings the promise of the Holy Spirit and the reality of judgment.

Yeshua identifies Himself with His people and submits Himself fully to the Father’s purpose.

The chapter begins with a voice in the wilderness and ends with a voice from heaven: the King has arrived, and the Father identifies Him as His beloved Son.

Memory Verse

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Matthew 3:2

What's Next?

The heavens have opened. The Spirit has descended. The Father has spoken. We might expect Yeshua now to begin gathering crowds, teaching and performing miracles.

Instead, the Spirit leads Him into the wilderness.

The same Yeshua whom the Father has just called “My beloved Son” will immediately face the tempter's challenge: “If You are the Son of God...” (Matthew 4:3). Chapter 4 will show us what kind of Son He is. Israel was tested in the wilderness. Now Israel's Messiah will be tested there as well. Where Israel failed, will Yeshua remain faithful? That is where Matthew takes us next.