

☒ LIFE OF JESUS

February 21, 2021 | *The Baptism of Jesus*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Read Matthew 3:1–17

What is our duty as Christians as we await Christ's return?

Pray for openness to be transformed by this passage.

THIS WEEK

☒ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Jesus's ministry begins a new age in God's plan for our world. It is the age in which, from the perspective of the Old Testament, God is re-establishing His kingdom in the world and installing His king to rule over it.

☒ THEOLOGY APPLIED

In the age in which we live Jesus's kingdom has come into the world but not to the universal extent that it will when He returns. This means we are to anticipate His return and join His mission in extending His kingdom in the world until the day He returns.

☒ MEDITATE

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2).

GETTING STARTED

+ *Use this section to prepare your heart for the truths you will encounter this week and to connect this passage's main point to your own life.*

Q: *What are some of the most significant moments on the national and world stage that have happened during your lifetime?*

Q: *What were some of the factors that caused the biggest changes during your lifetime?*

“The world will never be the same.” This claim is reserved for the most seminal moments throughout human history. The fall of the Roman empire; the Battle of Hastings; the invention of the printing press; the discovery of the Americas; the nailing of the Ninety-Five Theses to the church door at Wittenberg; the Treaty of Paris, which brought an end to the American revolution—these are all events that altered the course of human history. On a smaller scale, events within our own lifetimes have changed the world as we once knew it. Over the past generation, the school shooting at Columbine High School, 9/11, and the Covid-19 pandemic have all changed the world in which we lived.

John the Baptist knew such a moment was approaching in the life and ministry of Jesus. For John the Baptist, the last of a long line of prophets who anticipated the coming of the Messiah, Jesus’s ministry was not a surprise. John had seen the Messiah coming in the Scriptures of Israel. He went out into the wilderness of Judea to proclaim to all who would listen that the Messiah was coming, and the world would never be the same.

Q: *Can we believe Jesus was merely a good moral teacher and believe in the teachings of the Bible?*

Q: *How has Jesus changed everything in our world?*

APPLICATION POINT – Will your world ever be the same after meeting Jesus? If you have ever thought Jesus was merely a good moral teacher, just another voice among the pantheons of history, then John’s message is for you. You can try to minimize the importance of Jesus if you want, but not without denying the message of John the Baptist, Jesus Himself, the apostles, and, if we are to believe this passage, even the testimony of God Himself. The coming of Jesus is a dividing point in all of history. He is the one figure who changed everything. As you read this lesson and the rest of these lessons on the life of Jesus, ask yourself how the teaching of the Bible compares to the words of those who would write Jesus off as just another teacher. To claim that Jesus was just another teacher ignores the testimony of those who knew Him.

❏ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+ All four Gospels recognize the importance of John the Baptist's ministry and Jesus's baptism, but many Christians may struggle to see the significance of John, his message, and the baptism of Jesus.

1. PREPARING THE WAY OF THE LORD

2. THE COST OF DISBELIEF

3. THE SON'S PERFECT OBEDIENCE

GOING DEEPER

+This section will investigate Matthew 3:1–17 to see how John's message and ministry continue to speak to our time.

1. PREPARING THE WAY OF THE LORD

❏ MATTHEW 3:1–6

🗨️: *What are the main points of John's message?*

🗨️: *To whom is John applying Isaiah 40:3? Why would this have been shocking to his audience?*

John's message is quite simple. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Those seeking the kingdom must repent of their sin. As a symbol of their repentance and in anticipation of the kingdom's coming, John baptized people in the Jordan river. John used Isaiah 40:3 to set up a scene that would have been very familiar to his audience. Isaiah 40:3 envisions a royal procession, the citizens of the kingdom departing the city to meet their returning king in the wilderness. The king, proceeded by someone heralding his arrival, appears, and the entire procession follows him into the city. In Isaiah's prophecy, the coming king is none other than God Himself. John the Baptist set up a similar scene through his ministry. He gathered the people from the city into the wilderness. He heralded the arrival of the

coming king. John, however, identified Jesus as the coming king. The implication could not be clearer to anyone familiar with Isaiah 40:3. John the Baptist identified Jesus as Israel's king, as Israel's God.

Q: *How can you, in the manner envisioned by Isaiah and John the Baptist, make straight the paths of our coming king?*

Q: *Do you live as though the kingdom of heaven is at hand?*

APPLICATION POINT – The paths of the Lord are made straight through our repentance of sin. Repentance includes confessing sins and a turning away from them, and not merely turning away from sin but turning to Jesus Christ as Lord. Thus, repentance is replacing one master for another. Is there lingering sin in your life from which you need to repent? Take some time before continuing this study to confess and repent from any sin you are struggling with. Repentance is always the point from which Jesus begins changing our lives.

Q: *What do John's dress and diet indicate about him?*

Q: *Was John attempting to make a spectacle of himself with his message, dress, and diet?*

John's dress and diet were very modest. Although he was the herald of the coming king, he did not dress the part. Instead, his choice of clothing had much more in common with a poor, desert dweller. John's garments, however, have a deep significance. These were like the clothing of Elijah (2 Kings 1:8), one of the most famous prophets in the Old Testament, who was a herald of the coming day of the Lord (Malachi 4:5). He turned the hearts of the people toward repentance in preparation for the Lord's appearance. John the Baptist is linked with multiple Old Testament prophets. His role was to communicate to the people their need for repentance in the face of the fast-approaching appearance of the kingdom of God. In the context of Jesus's ministry, John was the forerunner of Jesus sent to prepare the way of the coming king.

Q: *Does your appearance draw attention to yourself or to your commitment to Christ as king?*

Q: *Have you joined John in being a herald of the coming king?*

APPLICATION POINT – As followers of Christ, we also proclaim our anticipation of the coming king. What course do your conversations with co-workers and other peers usually take? Some studies have suggested that if you do not mention your faith to others within the first six minutes of meeting them, the odds are astronomically against you ever sharing your faith with them. You do not have time to chat about the weather! Seek to be known, by your conversation, as someone who is committed to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

2. THE COST OF DISBELIEF

■ MATTHEW 3:7-12

Q: *Why was John so hostile toward the Pharisees and Sadducees?*

Q: *How is John's message to the Pharisees and Sadducees different from his message to the masses?*

A positive and enthusiastic chapter takes a sharp turn toward reservation and hostility with the appearance of the Pharisees and Sadducees. At this point in Matthew's Gospel, we have no background from which to understand John's reaction to these groups. It is not hard, however, to fill in the gaps from what we learn later in all the Gospels. These groups were the religious elites of Israel. There is little reason to wonder about their reaction to an outsider who captured the hearts of people they had previously enjoyed a monopoly over, not to mention John's bizarre appearance.

Furthermore, these religious elites were known to be hypocritical. They put on exorbitant displays of religious devotion, but their goal was not to bring glory to God but to put their own religiosity on display before others (Matthew 6). Such a mindset undercut any authenticity in their religious devotion. Could they bear fruit in keeping

with repentance? Not if they did it to draw attention to their own piety. Furthermore, if they were wary of accepting someone as unorthodox as John, how could they possibly be prepared to hear the message of Jesus? Indeed, as the Gospels progress, we see time after time that they were not prepared to hear what Jesus had to say.

❓: *Are you a religious elite on the outside looking in on the followers of Christ?*

❓: *Are your religious acts undercut by a lack of authenticity in your confession?*

APPLICATION POINT – The Pharisees and Sadducees had been at their religious game for so long that they could not stop playing. The same could be said for many people who have long filled the aisles of a church service and the seats of a Sunday school or small group meeting. This week consider ways to practice your faith that would draw zero attention to yourself. Give anonymously to a family in need in your church or to your church’s missionary fund. Pray in secret for an extended time. Perform an unseen service at your church building. If this diminishes your enthusiasm for practicing your faith, you are in great need of the repentance John preaches.

❓: *What two analogies did John use to describe the judgment coming to the Pharisees and Sadducees?*

❓: *How do these analogies relate to John’s statements concerning Abraham?*

Jewish people at the time of Jesus and John the Baptist (both Jews themselves) believed that the kingdom of heaven would inaugurate a new age on the earth in which God condemned the unrighteous and reestablished a kingdom among His people. This is essentially what John the Baptist was teaching as well. The difference between John and the Jewish religious elites was that the Jewish elites believed that their Jewish heritage, traceable to Abraham, guaranteed their place in the kingdom of heaven. They did not believe they needed to repent, and they had little need for Jesus.

John the Baptist, however, challenged their beliefs at every point. According to him, being a descendant of Abraham made little difference if they refused to repent of their wicked deeds. John foresaw a time of judgment even among the descendants of Abraham that would result in a thinning out among the people of God. Those who were faithful and penitent children of Abraham would remain while those who, like the Pharisees and Sadducees, eschewed

repentance would be removed from the kingdom of heaven. John used two analogies to illustrate his point. The first concerns an orchard. At the time of the harvest, the owners of the orchard cut down and remove the trees that did not produce fruit to clear the way for new trees to be planted. The second concerns a wheat harvest. When wheat is harvested, the farmers collect the seeds within their husks. The wheat crop is then thinned by separating the seeds from their husks, which is known as “chaff.” According to John, the descendants of Abraham would be sifted and thinned out by the coming judgment of God.

John placed Jesus at the very center of his message to the Pharisees and Sadducees. The coming judgment would ultimately center on their response to Him. Jesus is the harvester. If they responded to Jesus in repentance, they would bear fruit and remain with the children of Abraham. If they did not, however, they would be removed from the kingdom of heaven.

Q: *In what ways could you, like the religious elites addressed by John, be falsely assuming that your standing with God is secure?*

Q: *What are some common misconceptions in our culture concerning what it means to be a Christian?*

APPLICATION POINT – There is an endless number of ways in which people, even those who frequently attend church, falsely assume that their relationship with God is secure. Many people believe that if they try their best to live a moral life, God will work things out in their favor in the end. Some believe that by merely attending church, they will remain when God separates the wheat from the chaff. Other people believe that giving financially to the church will put them in God’s good graces. What misconceptions do you hold concerning your relationship with God and where you will stand on the day of judgment?

Sometimes faithful Christians are not confronted with these issues at the point of the final judgment but in the face of searing loss in their lives. The widow wonders if perhaps her husband might not have died if she had been more faithful. The father wonders if his children would not have rebelled against him if he had been more committed to his family. The teenager questions whether her failed relationship is tied to her disobedience to God in some matter. These are all misconceptions concerning how God relates to His people. Spend time this week identifying patterns of thought in your life that are rooted in misconceptions of how God relates to His people.

3. THE SON'S PERFECT OBEDIENCE

❏ MATTHEW 3:13-17

Q: *If John was administering a baptism of repentance, why did Jesus request baptism?*

Q: *How does Jesus's baptism fulfill all righteousness?*

One of the central tenants of the Christian faith is that Jesus was without sin (2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22). This is crucial for the logic behind the gospel. The gospel claims that Jesus, being without sin, was therefore able to take on the sins of others. If Jesus were also under the reign of sin, there would be no hope for us.

If Jesus was without sin, why did He request John's baptism of repentance? This same issue appears to be the root of John's objection to baptizing Him. Surely, He must be mistaken! But Jesus insisted on being baptized by John and even seemed to indicate that this baptism would be essential to His mission. What can account for Jesus's desire to take part in a baptism of repentance? The best explanation appears to be that Jesus's baptism was done on our behalf. Sin has corrupted every part of our lives, including, so it would appear, our ability to repent of sin. Thus, Jesus, as our substitute, repented fully on our behalf through submitting to a baptism of repentance.

Q: *In what areas of your life do you feel sin's intrusive presence the most?*

Q: *Why are humans resistant to repentance?*

APPLICATION POINT – Repentance is perhaps the most challenging discipline Christians face. It is not in our nature to admit to doing anything wrong. When confronted with wrongdoing, we instinctually either deny it or seek to explain away our guilt. This reaction to the reality of our fallen nature could not bring us further from the gospel. If Christ died to save lost sinners, then we place ourselves in grave danger if we attempt to deny our own sin. Instead of denying your sin and your need for repentance, attempt to be proactive about repenting this week. Be willing to admit that you may have erred in deed or judgment and confess your shortcomings and sins to others. You are never closer to Jesus than when you are ready to confess your need for Him.

Q: *How are all three members of the Godhead present at Jesus's baptism?*

Q: *What is the significance of the words spoken by the voice from heaven?*

When Jesus emerged from the waters of baptism, Matthew reports that a voice was heard affirming what the reader already knows to be true. Jesus is the beloved Son of God, and God has delighted in Him. We began by noting that John was anticipating the arrival of a new age with the appearance of the kingdom of heaven. This anticipation was affirmed by the voice heard from heaven. God identified Jesus as His beloved Son. The words spoken are an echo of Psalm 2:7. In this psalm, the One who sits in heaven decrees that His Anointed will demand the obedience of the nations. The kingdoms of the earth will be subjected to the reign of the obedient Son of God.

Q: *In Psalm 2, the Father declares that the Son will demand the obedience of the nations. How are you actively obeying the Son in all your life's situations?*

Q: *Psalm 2 ends by claiming that everyone who takes refuge in the Son will be blessed. From where are you looking for blessings?*

APPLICATION POINT – Psalm 2 offers the reader two ways, and only two ways, of living. The kings of the earth can either submit to the rule of the Son and be blessed, or they can conspire against the Son and be dashed to pieces. The same options lie before us. We can submit to the rule of the Son and prosper under His reign, or we can conspire against His rule and suffer judgment. Although our salvation is a one-time event, choosing to submit to the Son demands a daily denial of self in favor of Christ. This week, begin each day by reminding yourself that you are submitting to the rule of the Son. This is a wonderful reminder of the gospel and of Jesus's reign at the start of every day.

NEXT STEPS

After we encounter Jesus, our world should never be the same. This is often true when we initially turn to Christ for salvation, but as time wears on, the initial feelings of affection, thankfulness, and devotion often begin to wane. This week, take a trip down the gospel's memory lane. Write out the story of your conversion to Jesus Christ. What was your life like before? What sins did you struggle with? What were your habits? What led you to Christ as Savior? How has your life been changed since? Reliving your testimony can often help you see past your current circumstances and appreciate where God has brought you since committing to Christ's lordship. If there is time, consider sharing your testimonies during your group time. Your testimonies can be encouraging to one another.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

Lord Jesus, the world will never be the same after your life, your death, your resurrection, and your ascension. May I always stand in awe of your work in my life and in the world.

Father, your kingdom has come now upon the earth. Direct my steps to join your mission in making your kingdom pervasive over every square inch of this world.

Jesus, thank you for obeying the Father perfectly on my behalf. I cannot obey God's will perfectly. I cannot even repent perfectly of disobeying God's will. I am in utter need of your substitution on my behalf.