

Matthew 3

by John Nelson Darby

The sermon explores the significance of John the Baptist's ministry, Jesus' baptism, and the revelation of the Trinity in Matthew 3.

Scripture: Isaiah 40:3, Matthew 3:2, Matthew 3:11

Topics: "Repentance", "The Kingdom of Heaven"

Description

John Nelson Darby expounds on Matthew 3, emphasizing the ministry of John the Baptist as a preparation for the coming of Jehovah, who calls the people to repentance in light of the imminent kingdom of heaven. He highlights the significance of Jesus' baptism, where He identifies with the repentant remnant of Israel, fulfilling righteousness and receiving divine affirmation as the beloved Son of God. Darby notes that John's call for repentance was not just for the people but also a warning of impending judgment for those who remained unrepentant. The sermon illustrates the transition from the old covenant to the new, where Jesus, as the Messiah, brings forth a new relationship with God through grace. Ultimately, the message underscores the necessity of humility and repentance as prerequisites for entering the kingdom of heaven.

Transcript

We now begin His actual history. John the Baptist comes to prepare the way of Jehovah before Him, according to the prophecy of Isaiah; proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven was at hand, and calling on the people to repent. It is by these three things that John's ministry to Israel is characterised in this Gospel. First the Lord Jehovah Himself was coming. The Holy Ghost leaves out the words "for our God," at the end of the verse, because Jesus comes as man in humiliation, although acknowledged at the same time to be Jehovah, and Israel could not be thus owned as entitled to say "our." In the second place the kingdom of heaven [See Footnote #6] was at hand-that new dispensation which was to take the place of the one which, properly speaking, belonged to Sinai, where the Lord had spoken on the earth. In this new dispensation "the heavens should reign." They should be the source of, and characterise, God's authority in His Christ. Thirdly, the people, instead of being blessed in their present condition, were called to repentance in view of the approach of this kingdom. John therefore takes his place in the wilderness, departing from the Jews, with whom he could not associate himself because he came in the way of righteousness (chap. 21:32). His food is that which he finds in the wilderness (even his prophetic garments bearing witness to the position which he had taken on the part of God), himself filled with the Holy Ghost.

Thus was he a prophet, for he came from God, and addressed himself to the people of God to call them to repentance, and he proclaimed the blessing of God according to the promises of Jehovah their God; but he was more than a prophet, for he declared as an immediate thing the introduction of a new dispensation, long expected, and the advent of the Lord in Person. At the same time, although coming to Israel, he did not own the people, for they were to be judged; the threshing-floor of Jehovah was to be cleansed, the trees that did not bear good fruit to be cut down. It would be a remnant only that Jehovah would place in the new position in the kingdom that he announced, without its being yet revealed in what manner it was to be established. He proclaimed the judgment of the people.

What a fact of immeasurable greatness was the presence of the Lord God in the midst of His people, in the Person of Him who, although He was doubtless to be the fulfilment of all the promises, was necessarily, though rejected, the Judge of all the evil existing among His people!

And the more we give these passages their true application, that is to say, the more we apply them to Israel, the more we apprehend their real force. [See Footnote #7]

No doubt repentance is an eternal necessity to every soul that approaches God; but what a light is thrown upon this truth, when we see the intervention of the Lord Himself who calls His people to this repentance, setting aside-on their refusal-the whole system of their relationships with Him, and establishing a new dispensation-a kingdom which only belongs to those who hear Him-and causing at length His judgment to break forth against His people and the city which He had so long cherished! "If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes."

This truth gives room for the exhibition of another and most highly important one, announced here in connection with the sovereign rights of God rather than in its consequences, but which already contained in itself all those consequences. The people from all parts, and as we learn elsewhere especially the ungodly and despised, went out to be baptised, confessing their sins. But those who, in their own eyes, held the chief place among the people, were in the eyes of the prophet who loved the people according to God, the objects of the judgment he announced. Wrath was impending. Who had warned these scornful men to flee from it? Let them humble themselves like the rest; let them take their true place, and prove their change of heart. To boast in the privileges of their nation, or of their fathers, availed nothing before God. He required that which His very nature, His truth, demanded. Moreover He was sovereign; He was able of those stones to raise up children to Abraham. This is what His sovereign grace has done, through Christ, with regard to the Gentiles. There was reality needed. The axe was at the root of the trees, and those that did not bring forth good fruit should be cut down. This is the great moral principle which the judgment was going to put in force. The blow was not yet struck, but the axe was already at the root of the trees. John was come to bring those who received his testimony into a new position, or at least into a new state in which they were prepared for it. On their repentance he would distinguish them from the rest by baptism. But He who was coming after John-He whose shoes John was not worthy to bear-would thoroughly purge His floor, would separate those that were truly His, morally His, from among His people Israel (that was His floor), and would execute judgment on the rest. John on his part opened the door to repentance beforehand; afterwards should come the judgment.

Judgment was not the only work that belonged to Jesus. Two things are however attributed to Him in John's testimony He baptises with fire-this is the judgment proclaimed in verse 12, which consumes all that is evil. But He baptises also with the Holy Ghost-that Spirit which, given to, and acting in divine energy

in man, quickened, redeemed, cleansed in the blood of Christ, brings him out from the influence of all that acts on the flesh, and sets him in connection and in communion with all that is revealed of God, with the glory into which He brings His creatures in the life which He imparts, destroying morally in us the power of all that is contrary to the enjoyment of these privileges.

Observe here, that the only good fruit recognised by John, as the way of escape, is the sincere confession, through grace, of sin. Those only who make this confession escape the axe. There were really no good trees excepting those which confessed that they were bad.

But what a solemn moment was this for the people beloved of God! What an event was the presence of Jehovah in the midst of the nation with whom He stood in relationship!

Observe that John the Baptist does not here present the Messiah as the Saviour come in grace, but as the Head of the kingdom, as Jehovah, who would execute judgment if the people did not repent. We shall see afterwards the position which He took in grace.

In verse 13 Jesus Himself, who until now has been presented as the Messiah and even as Jehovah, comes to John to be baptised with the baptism of repentance. We must remember that to come to this baptism was the only good fruit which a Jew, in his then condition, could produce. The act proved itself to be the fruit of a work of God-of the effectual work of the Holy Ghost. He who repents confesses that he has previously walked afar from God; so that it is a new movement, the fruit of God's word and work in him, the sign of a new life, of the life of the Spirit in his soul. By the very fact of John's mission, there was no other fruit, no other admissible proof, of life from God, in a Jew. We are not to infer from this, that there were none in whom the Spirit already acted vitally; but, in this condition of the people and according to the call of God by His servant, that was the proof of this life-of the turning of the heart to God. These were the true remnant of the people, those whom God acknowledged as such; and it was thus they were separated from the mass who were ripening for judgment. These were the true saints-the excellent of the earth; although the self-abasement of repentance could be their only true place. It was there they must begin. When God brings in mercy and justice, they avail themselves thankfully of the former, confessing it to be their only resource, and they bow their heart before the latter, as the just consequence of the condition of God's people, but as applying it to themselves .

Now Jesus presents Himself in the midst of those who do this. Although truly the Lord, Jehovah, the righteous Judge of His people, He who was to purge His floor, He nevertheless takes His place among the faithful remnant who humble themselves before this judgment. He takes the place of the lowest of His people before God; as in Psalms 16 He calls Jehovah His Lord, saying unto Him, "My goodness extendeth not to Thee"; and says to the saints, and the excellent in the earth, "all my delight is in them." Perfect testimony of grace-the Saviour identifying Himself, according to this grace, with the first movement of the Spirit in the hearts of His own people, humbling Himself not only in the condescension of grace towards them, but in taking His place as one of them in their true position before God; not merely to comfort their hearts by such kindness, but in order to sympathise with all their sorrows and their difficulties; in order to be the pattern, the source, and the perfect expression of every sentiment suitable to their position.

With wicked unrepentant Israel He could not associate Himself, but with the first living effect of the word and Spirit of God in the poor of the flock, He could and did in grace. He does so now. With the first right step, one really of God, Christ is found.

But there was yet more. He comes to bring those who received Him into relation with God, according to the favour which rested on perfectness like His, and on the love which, by taking up His people's cause, satisfied the heart of the Lord, and, having perfectly glorified God in all that He is, made it possible for Him to satisfy Himself with goodness. We know indeed that in order to do this, the Saviour had to lay down His life, because the condition of the Jew, as that of every man, required this sacrifice before either the one or the other could stand in relation with the God of truth. But even for this the love of Jesus did not fail. Here however He is leading them on to the enjoyment of the blessing expressed in His Person, which should be securely founded on that sacrifice-blessing which they must reach by the path of repentance, into which they entered by John's baptism; which Jesus received with them, that they might go on together towards the possession of all the good things which God has prepared for them that loved Him.

John, feeling the dignity and excellency of the Person of Him who came unto him, opposes the Lord's intention. The Holy Ghost by this brings out the true character of the Lord's action. As to Himself, it was righteousness which brought Him there, and not sin-righteousness which He accomplished in love. He, as well as John the Baptist, fulfilled that which belonged to the place assigned Him by God. With what condescension He links Himself at the same time with John-"It becometh us." He is the lowly and obedient Servant. It was thus He ever behaved Himself on earth. Moreover, as to His position, grace brought Jesus there, where sin brought us, who came in by the door the Lord had opened for His sheep. In confessing sin as it is, in coming before God in the confession of (the opposite of sin morally) our sin, we find ourselves in company with Jesus. [See Footnote #8] Indeed it is in us the fruit of His Spirit. This was the case with the poor sinners who came out to John. Thus it was that Jesus took His place in righteousness and obedience among men, and more exactly among the repentant Jews. It is in this position of a man-righteous, obedient, and fulfilling on earth, in perfect humility, the work for which He had offered Himself in grace, according to Psalms 40, giving Himself up to the accomplishment of all the will of God in complete renunciation-that God His Father fully acknowledged Him, and sealed Him, declaring Him on earth to be His well-beloved Son.

Being baptised-the most striking token of the place He had taken with His people-the heavens are opened unto Him, and He sees the Holy Ghost descending on Him like a dove; and, lo! a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

But these circumstances demand attention.

Never were the heavens opened to the earth, nor to a man on the earth, before the beloved Son was there. [See Footnote #9] God had doubtless, in His longsuffering and in the way of providence, blessed all His creatures; He had also blessed His own people, according to the rules of His government on earth. Besides this, there were the elect, whom He had preserved in faithfulness. Nevertheless until now the heavens had not been opened. A testimony had been sent by God in connection with His government of the earth; but there was no object on the earth upon which the eye of God could rest with complacency, until Jesus, sinless and obedient, His beloved Son, stood there. But what is so precious to us is, that it is as soon as in grace He takes publicly this place of humiliation with Israel-that is, with the faithful remnant, presenting Himself thus before God, fulfilling His will-the heavens open upon an object worthy of their attention. Ever doubtless was He worthy of their adoration, even before the world was. But now He has just taken this place in the dealings of God as a man, and the heavens opened unto Jesus, the object of God's entire affection on the earth. The Holy Ghost descends upon Him visibly. And He, a man on earth, a man taking His place with the meek of the people who repented, is acknowledged as the Son of God. He is not only anointed of God, but, as man, He is conscious of the descent of the Holy Ghost upon Him-the

seal of the Father set upon Him. Here it is evidently not His divine nature, in the character of the Eternal Son of the Father. The seal would not even be in conformity with that character; and as to His Person it is manifested, and His consciousness of it, at twelve years old in Luke's Gospel. But while He is such, He is also a man, the Son of God on the earth, and is sealed as a man. As a man He has the consciousness of the immediate presence of the Holy Ghost with Him. This presence is in connection with the character of lowliness, meekness, and obedience, in which the Lord appeared down here. It is "like a dove" that the Holy Ghost descends upon Him; just as it was in the form of tongues of fire, that He came down upon the heads of the disciples, for their testimony in power in this world, according to the grace which addressed each and every one in his own language.

Jesus thus creates in His own position as man the place into which He introduces us by redemption (John 20:17). But the glory of His Person is always carefully guarded. There is no object presented to Jesus, as to Saul for instance, and, in a still more analogous case, to Stephen, who, being full of the Spirit, sees also the heavens opened, and looks up into them, and sees Jesus, the Son of man, and is transformed into His image. Jesus has come; He is Himself the object over whom the heavens open; He has no transforming object, as Stephen, or as we ourselves in the Spirit; heaven looks down at Him, the perfect object of delight. It is His relationship with His Father, already existing, which is sealed. [See Footnote #10] Neither does the Holy Ghost create His character (except so far as, with respect to His human nature, He was conceived in the virgin Mary's womb by the power of the Holy Ghost); He had connected Himself with the poor, in the perfection of that character, before He was sealed, and then acts according to the energy and the power of that which He received without measure in His human life here below (compare Acts 10:38, Matthew 12:28, John 3:34).

We find in the word four memorable occasions on which the heavens open. Christ is the object of each of these revelations; each has its especial character. Here the Holy Ghost descends upon Him, and He is acknowledged the Son of God (compare John 1:33, 34). At the end of the same chapter of John, He declares Himself to be the Son of man. There it is the angels of God who ascend and descend upon Him. He is, as Son of man, the object of their ministry. [See Footnote #11] At the end of Acts 7 an entirely new scene is opened. The Jews reject the last testimony that God sends them. Stephen, by whom this testimony is rendered, is filled with the Holy Ghost, and the heavens are opened to him. The earthly system was definitely closed by the rejection of the Holy Ghost's testimony to the glory of the ascended Christ. But this is not merely a testimony. The Christian is filled with the Spirit, heaven is opened to him, the glory of God is manifested to him, and the Son of man appears to him, standing at the right hand of God. This is a different thing from the heavens open over Jesus, the object of God's delight on earth. It is heaven open to the Christian himself, his object being there when rejected on earth. He sees there by the Holy Ghost the heavenly glory of God, and Jesus, the Son of man, the special object of the testimony he renders, in the glory of God. The difference is as remarkable as it is interesting to us; and it exhibits, in a most striking manner, the true position of the Christian as on earth, and the change which the rejection of Jesus by His earthly people has produced. Only, the church, the union of believers in one body with the Lord in heaven, was not yet revealed. Afterwards (Revelation 19) heaven opens, and the Lord Himself comes forth, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Thus we see Jesus, the Son of God on earth, the object of heaven's delight, sealed with the Holy Ghost; Jesus, the Son of man, the object of the ministry of heaven, angels being His servants; Jesus, on high at the right hand of God, and the believer, full of the Spirit, and suffering here for His sake, beholding the glory on high, and the Son of man in the glory; and Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords, coming forth

to judge and make war against the scornful men who dispute His authority and oppress the earth.

To return: the Father Himself acknowledges Jesus, the obedient man on earth, who enters as the true Shepherd by the door, as His beloved Son in whom is all His delight. Heaven is opened to Him; He sees the Holy Ghost come down to seal Him, the infallible strength and support of the perfection of His human life; and He has the Father's own testimony to the relationship between them. No object on which His faith was to rest is presented to Him as it is to us. It is His own relation to heaven and to His Father which is sealed. His soul enjoys it through the descent of the Holy Ghost and the voice of His Father.

But this passage in Matthew requires some further notice. The blessed Lord, or rather what occurred as to Him, gives the place or model in which He sets believers, be they Jew or Gentile: only of course we are brought there by redemption. "I go to my Father and your Father, my God and your God," is His blessed word after His resurrection. But to us heaven is opened; we are sealed with the Holy Ghost; the Father owns us as sons. Only the divine dignity of Christ's Person is always carefully guarded here in humiliation, as in the transfiguration in glory. Moses and Elias are in the same glory, but disappear when Peter's haste, permitted to be expressed, would put them on a level. The nearer we are to a divine Person, the more we adore and recognise what He is.

But another very remarkable fact is found here. For the first time, when Christ takes this place among men in lowliness, the Trinity is fully revealed. No doubt the Son and Spirit are mentioned in the Old Testament. But there the unity of the Godhead is the great revealed point. Here the Son is owned in man, the Holy Ghost comes down on Him, and the Father owns Him as His Son. What a wonderful connection with man! what a place for man to be in! Through Christ's connection with Him the Godhead is revealed in its own fulness. His being a man draws it out in its display. But He was really a man, but the Man in whom the counsels of God about man were to be fulfilled.

Hence, as He has realised and displayed the place in which man is set with God in His own Person, and in the counsels of grace as to us our relationship with God, so, as we are in conflict with the enemy, He enters into that side of our position also. We have our relationship with God and our Father, and now we have to say to Satan also. He overcomes for us, and shews us how to overcome. Remark too, the relationship with God is first fully settled and brought out, and then, as in that place, the conflict with Satan begins, and so with us. But the first question was, Would the second Adam stand where the first had failed? only, in the wilderness of this world and Satan's power-instead of the blessings of God-for there we had got.

Another point is to be remarked here, fully to bring out the place the Lord takes. The law and the prophets were till John. Then the new thing is announced, the kingdom of heaven. But judgment closes with God's people. The axe is at the root of the trees, the fan is in the hand of the coming One, the wheat is gathered into God's garner, the chaff burnt up. That is, there is a close of the history of God's people in judgment. We come in on the ground of being lost, anticipating the judgment; but man's history as responsible was closed. Hence it is said, "now once in the end of the world he hath appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." It has happened externally and literally to Israel; but it is morally true for us: only we are gathered for heaven, as in result the remnant then, and shall be in heaven. But, Christ rejected, the history of responsibility is over, and we come in in grace as already lost. Consequent on the announcement of this as imminent, Christ comes and, identifying Himself with the remnant who escape on repentance, makes this new place for man on the earth: only we could not be in it till redemption was accomplished. Still He revealed the Father's name to those He had given Him out of it.

Footnotes for Matthew 3

6: This expression is found only in Matthew, as specially occupied with dispensations, and the dealings of God with the Jews. "The kingdom of God" is the generic term. "The kingdom of heaven" is the kingdom of God, but the kingdom of God as specially taking this character of heavenly government; we shall find it (farther on) separated into the kingdom of our Father, and the kingdom of the Son of man.

7: And we must remember that, besides the special promises to, and calling, of Israel as God's earthly people, that people were just man viewed in his responsibility to God under the fullest culture that God could give him. Up to the flood there was testimony but no dispensational dealings, or institutions of God. After it, in the new world, human government, calling and promise in Abraham, law, Messiah, God come in grace, everything God could do, and that in perfect patience, was done, and in vain as to good in flesh; and now Israel was being set aside as in the flesh, and the flesh judged, the fig-tree cursed as fruitless, and God's man, the second Adam, He in whom blessing was by redemption, introduced into the world. In the first three Gospels, as we have seen, we have Christ presented to man to be received; in John, man is set aside and Israel, and God's sovereign ways in grace and resurrection brought in.

8: It is the same thing as to the sense of our nothingness. He made Himself nothing, and in the consciousness of our nothingness we find ourselves with Him, and at the same time are filled with His fulness. Even when we fall, it is not until we are brought to know ourselves as we really are that we find Jesus raising us up again.

9: In the beginning of Ezekiel, it is said indeed that the heavens were opened; but this was only in vision, as the prophet himself explains. In that instance it was the manifestation of God in judgment.

10: This is true also of us when we are in that relationship by grace.

11: It is all a mistake to make Christ the ladder. He, as Jacob was, is the object of their service and ministry.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-nelson-darby/matthew-3/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net