



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Gospel According to St. Matthew

Chapter 3

Bishop Youssef



Introduction

In this Chapter We Will Study:

- The message and ministry of St. John the Baptist
- The purpose and meaning of Jesus' baptism

John the Baptist Prepares the Way (3:1-12)



- St. Matthew skips ahead about thirty years to describe events that prepared Jesus for His public ministry
- John the Baptist served as a forerunner with his own ministry of preaching repentance in the wilderness of Judea
- Called the Baptist or Baptizer because he baptized the people
- He came forth as a preacher and reformer
- He was the subject of prophecy (Isaiah 40:3; Malachi 3:1); his birth was announced by an angel; he was of a priestly family, the son of Zacharias and Elizabeth, the cousin of St. Mary

John the Baptist Prepares the Way (3:1-12)



- He was now about thirty years old
- The wilderness of Judea is a region thinly inhabited, used mostly for pasture, a rocky tract in the eastern part of Judea and west of the Jordan and the Dead Sea
- The great rite of St. John was baptism, but the great duty commanded was repentance
- Repentance in the Greek language signifies a changing of our minds and hearts from evil to better
- The long expected kingdom ruled by the Messiah King, predicted by the prophets, and especially by Daniel (Daniel 2:44) is near

John the Baptist Prepares the Way (3:1-12)



- The announcement of this anxiously-awaited-for kingdom thrilled all Judea
- It is to be noted that the kingdom to which he referred was in the future, but near
- It is the kingdom of heaven, not an earthly kingdom, and hence, must have a King sent from heaven
- The kingdom of Messiah, whose government will be heavenly, and nothing but heavenly
- This is quoted from Isaiah 40:3, which clearly proves that John the Baptist was the person of whom the prophet spoke

John the Baptist Prepares the Way (3:1-12)



- John was called a voice because the whole man was a sermon
- Also because he would call not attention to himself as a person, but only to the Savior, whose way he had come to prepare
- The messengers sent before the eastern kings prepared the way for the chariots and armies of their monarchs
- A king's highway had to be carried through the open land of the wilderness, valleys filled up, and hills leveled
- Interpreted in its spiritual application, the wilderness was the world lying in evil

John the Baptist Prepares the Way (3:1-12)



- When St. John cried, Make his paths straight, he meant, Stop your crooked ways
- This prediction is quoted in all the four Gospels, showing that it was regarded as a great outstanding one, and the predicted forerunner as the connecting link between the old and the new economies

John the Baptist Prepares the Way (3:1-12)



- St John clothed with a sort of coarse or rough garment made of the shaggier camel's hair woven in a coarse fabric which, it appears, was common to the prophets, Zechariah 13:4
- In such a garment we find Elijah clothed, 2 Kings 1:8
- And as St. John had been designed under the name of this prophet, Malachi 4:5, whose spirit and qualifications he was to possess, Luke 1:17, he took the same habit and lived in the same state of self-denial
- Great multitudes went to see him
- They were impressed and moved by his preaching

John the Baptist Prepares the Way (3:1-12)



- The word "baptize" signifies originally to dye
- This baptism was at once a public seal of their felt need of deliverance from sin, of their expectation of the coming Deliverer, and of their readiness to welcome Him when He appeared
- Baptism itself, a burial in water, a baptism into death, a symbol of the burial of one who dies to the old life, is a confession of sins
- There was also a verbal confession
- The acknowledgment of sin, repentance and baptism are prescribed as conditions of pardon

John the Baptist Prepares the Way (3:1-12)



- The Pharisees were the most numerous and wealthy sect of the Jews
- They derived their name from the Hebrew word Pharash, which signifies to set apart, or to separate, because they separated themselves from the rest of their fellow citizens, and professedly devoted themselves to special strictness in religion
- They had in the Savior's time degenerated into a set of formalists, who paid far more attention to outward forms than to inner life
- They were diligent in observing ceremonies, very orthodox, but were filled with spiritual pride
- From an early period of Christ's ministry they opposed Him

John the Baptist Prepares the Way (3:1-12)



- The Sadducees, derived their name from Sadduc, the founder of the sect
- Sadducees denied the existence of angels and spirits, consequently all Divine influence and inspiration, and also the resurrection of the dead
- Annas and Caiaphas, the high priests, were Sadducees
- There is no serpent that is more poisonous than the viper
- Expressing the deadly influence of both sects alike upon the community
- Both alike they poisoned of the nation's religious principles

John the Baptist Prepares the Way (3:1-12)



- St. John expresses his astonishment that sinners so hardened and so hypocritical as they were should have been tempted to flee from coming wrath
- As if he is saying, "Do not bring your crafty and deceitful and dissimulation to this work; do not carry your hypocrisy into your professed repentance, but prove your sincerity by forsaking sin, and thus give evidence that this coming to Jordan to be baptized is not an act of dissimulation"

John the Baptist Prepares the Way (3:1-12)



- St. John now being gifted with a knowledge of the human heart, like a true minister of righteousness and lover of souls here directs them how to evidence and carry out their repentance, supposing it genuine; and in the following verses warns them of their danger in case it were not
- The change of life is the proof of the change of heart
- They believed that Abraham's race was to be saved, if all else were destroyed. St. John destroys the refuge of sin
- Pointing, perhaps, to the stones of the Jordan
- St. John points to the Gentiles, who were to become Abraham's children by faith (Galatians 3:29)

John the Baptist Prepares the Way (3:1-12)



- Laying the axe at the root of a tree is intended to denote that the tree is to be cut down
- It was not merely to be trimmed, or to be cut about the limbs, but the very tree itself was to be struck
- The tree meant the Jewish nation
- They should bear fruit as well as flowers
- Their professions of repentance were not enough
- They should show, by a holy life, that their profession was genuine
- Fruitless fig-tree was afterward made by our Lord the representative of the whole Jewish nation (Luke 13:6-9), but here St. John declares a universal law
- What does not bear fruit shall finally be destroyed

John the Baptist Prepares the Way (3:1-12)



- Thrown into fire," which in another verse is called "unquenchable," can be no other than that future "torment" of the unrepentant whose "smoke ascended up for ever and ever," and which by the Judge Himself is styled "everlasting punishment" (Matthew 25:46)
- St. John's baptism was only a water baptism
- The King could send the Holy Spirit, and give a mightier baptism, in addition to the outward baptism
- So humble was St. John, compared with the King, that he was hardly worthy to be His servant

John the Baptist Prepares the Way (3:1-12)



- This was the province of the Spirit of God, and of it alone; therefore he is represented here under the similitude of fire, because he was to illuminate and invigorate the soul, penetrate every part, and assimilate the whole to the image of the God of glory
- “of fire”, St. Chrysostom says; it means the superabundant graces of the Spirit
- St. Cyril, St. Jerome, and others, understand by it the descent of the Holy Spirit, on the day of Pentecost

John the Baptist Prepares the Way (3:1-12)



- Rather the winnowing shovel, by which the wheat and chaff were tossed together into the air, so that the wind would blow the chaff away
- In Palestine grain was threshed on an outdoor threshing floor, either by hand or the treading of cattle, and winnowed by casting it up to the wind
- A reference is here made to the practice of burning the chaff under process of winnowing
- The wheat is the righteous, the chaff is the wicked, and Christ is the winnower; the granary is heaven, the unquenchable fire is hell

John Baptizes Jesus (3:13-17)



- The Savior is now introduced as about to enter on His work, or as about to be solemnly set apart to His great office of Messiah and Redeemer
- Baptism was not in His case a symbol of personal reformation and repentance, for He was sinless; but it was a solemn rite by which He was set apart to His great office
- St. John earnestly and pressingly opposed Him
- When Jesus came before St. John, he perhaps knew, by the Spirit, His purity, and may have believed that He was the Messiah, but as yet he knew Him not (John 1:33)
- He could not be certain until he saw the Divine sign

John Baptizes Jesus (3:13-17)



- The term now implies that the relation of Jesus to His work made it proper that now He should be baptized
- It is true that baptism was for sinners; Jesus was sinless; but He humbled Himself, accepted the burden of human duties, and must set a perfect example to men
- He obeyed the Jewish law, and it was needful also that He obey the Divine rite that John had inaugurate
- In order to fulfill all righteousness, show forth a perfect obedience, set a perfect example, it became Him to submit to the institution of baptism, and it became St. John to administer it to him
- Us refers to Jesus and St. John

John Baptizes Jesus (3:13-17)



- The baptism took place in the river Jordan, and was doubtless by immersion
- The Holy Trinity was revealed in Jesus' baptism
- Three times God speaks from heaven in connection with the ministry of Christ--at His baptism (Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22), His transfiguration (Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35), and in the temple just before His suffering (John 12:28)
- The very words addressed to the Messiah in Psalm 2:7
- The baptism of Christ was the occasion of His public recognition

John Baptizes Jesus (3:13-17)



- It is just after He has humbled Himself in an act of obedience, in baptism, that the Holy Spirit anoints Him as the Christ, and God formally acknowledges Him as His Son
- We must be baptized if we would follow Christ
- It is when we repent and are baptized that we receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38)
- When we have obeyed the Lord He will recognize us as His children



Conclusion

- What was St. John's mission as foretold by Isaiah?
- Why is repentance necessary for admittance into the Kingdom of heaven?
- Was St. John offering the forgiveness of sins through his baptism and was it the same as Christian baptism?
- How is it that the 1st century A.D. Jews interpreted the words "Kingdom of Heaven" and what did St. Matthew mean by the "coming" of the kingdom?



Conclusion

- In identifying the prophetic voice as St. John the Baptist, what veiled revelation is St. Matthew making concerning the identity of Jesus?
- What is the point of John's insult to the Sadducees and Pharisees? Why does he call them "vipers"?
- At first, St. John is hesitant to baptize Jesus. Why?
- What is the significance of the heavens opening?
- How is the mystery of the Holy Trinity revealed in Jesus' baptism?