



## Oasis: A Voice in the Wilderness Matthew 3:1-17

### John the Baptist Prepares the Way

**1** In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea **2** and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” **3** This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’” **4** John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. **5** People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. **6** Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. **7** But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? **8** Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. **9** And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. **10** The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. **11** “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. **12** His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

### The Baptism of Jesus

**13** Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. **14** But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

**15** Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.

**16** As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. **17** And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

*Preface: Welcome to this week’s LC Bible study in our sermon series “Living God’s Story” as we continue to work our way through the Bible, from Genesis through Revelation. So fasten your seat belt – it is quite a ride! These LC studies will complement the sermons, often using the same biblical texts, and will help your LC go deeper in personal understanding and application. These italicized portions are meant to resource and help you in leading.*

## **This Study's BIG idea: To offer us a deeper understanding of baptism and what it means to live repentant lives.**

Possible starter question (3 min.): What radical examples of obedience have you witnessed that have challenged you in your walk with God?

Transitional comment: In today's passage, we want to see how John the Baptist' life and message offer us insight of the legalism of his day and how his message, practice of baptism and call for repentance prepared the way of the One who was promised, our Savior Jesus.  
(If you haven't already prayed, pray for the Holy Spirit to lead your study, opening our eyes and hearts.)

Let's listen as our passage/story is read: **Matthew 3:1-17**

Personal time to re-read and ponder: Take several moments to read this again on your own.

### **John the Baptist**

O – Why is John the Baptist living and preaching in the wilderness?

*Reasons include:*

- *He publically criticized King Herod Antipas for marrying his brother's wife, Herodias.*

*Context: "Herod the Great"'s two sons were Herod Philip and Herod Antipas. Herod Philip married a woman called Herodias. When Herod Antipas visited his brother, he wanted Herodias as a wife for himself. So Herod Antipas divorced his own wife, and married Herodias. She, of course, had to divorce Herod Philip first. The Jewish law does not permit such behavior (Leviticus 18:16 and 20:21). John the Baptist said this was wrong, which angered Herodias, and eventually led to John's arrest, imprisonment and beheading.*

- *His ministry is literally living out Matthew 3:3 (Isaiah 40:3), "The voice of the one crying out in the desert" ("wilderness" in the NRSV translation).*

- *This is profoundly interesting because important spiritual events happen in the Temple, certainly not in the wilderness.*

O – How does Matthew describe John's physical appearance and lifestyle?

*The description of John's clothing and food serves to separate him from his society and again, to identify him with the prophetic voice of the wilderness.*

*It echoes Elijah's appearance in Kings. The Elijah-John the Baptist theme runs throughout Mark and Matthew.*

*His diet of eating "locusts" has been widely discussion. It's more likely that they were the actual insect which is a ritually clean food (Lev. 11:22) and eaten by the poorer people of the desert in ancient times (as opposed to the vegetable type seeds of the "carob pod tree").*

*The "honey" could be from the bees but many Biblical scholars believe it to be the paste from the tamarisk tree.*

I – What does this tell about John the Baptist?

*He took his calling as a "prophet of God" as seriously as should have.*

I – What do you think of when you hear the phrase "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near"?

*A literal translation is "...has come near." Other translations say, "is at hand." Point being - there is a very strong sense of urgency.*

A – Have you ever experienced the voice of God in an unlikely place?

## Significance of Baptism

O – What do you notice about the masses coming to get baptized by John?

I – What does the “confession of sins” element imply about the state of Judaism of the day?

*It seems to have been seen as generally compromised if many were choosing to leave their villages and confess their sins and be baptized by a prophet in the wilderness.*

O – What strikes you as interesting in this baptism scene?

Further Observation - since there is no Old Testament mandate commanding Jewish believers to be baptized, where does this come from?

*There have always been various ritual immersions and washings in Judaism. A variety of pools/cisterns have existed in religious households and public places (including the Temple). Baptism was also used as a public demonstration for Gentiles who had converted to Judaism.*

*Some Old Testament allusions to baptism include:*

*-Levites were cleansed via sprinkling of water – a type of baptism to purify them in preparation for service to God and man (Num 8:6-7, 11, 21)*

*-Naaman's washing in the Jordan upon Elisha's instruction - II Kings 5:14.*

I – The Greek word for “baptize” is *baptizō* which means “to dip” or “to immerse”. However, John was not simply calling for “purification”, but for “repentance.” What distinctions can we draw from the two?

*It's important to remember that baptism for John the Baptist did not include a crucifixion/resurrection idea, as it had not happened yet. In short, John is calling for a new start, a new life, to be born again.*

A – As we can see, the practice of baptism has many beautiful layers to it. What does the beauty and the meaning of baptism hold for you and for us a church?

## John's Feud with the Establishment

O – Upon seeing the Pharisees and the Sadducees coming, John has some harsh words for them. Further, they are competing sects. What does this tell us about their position on John and why do you suppose they have come to the wilderness to be baptized by him?

*It's generally speculated that it's a publicity stunt on their part to use John to garner favor with the people.*

*The Pharisees were very educated in the Torah and the Jewish traditions, were very pious and were deeply critical of their Jewish contemporaries.*

*The Sadducees were elitists who wanted to maintain the priestly caste but for the sake of power. They were not pious, incorporated the Hellenistic lifestyle and did not believe in an afterlife.*

*The Essenes were a sect that broke off from the Pharisees and led a monastic life in the desert, adopting strict dietary laws and a commitment to celibacy. Not mentioned in the New Testament but included in the works of Josephus and other early 1<sup>st</sup>-cent. writings.*

I – Why does John verbally rebuke the Pharisees and Sadducees and label them as a “broods of vipers”?

*John's strong words against the Pharisees helps us see that he believed they were not only insincere in coming out to the wilderness to be baptized but deceitful in their desire to control these people for their own agendas. Further, using “snake” imagery alludes back to the deceitful serpent in the Garden. Jewish audiences would have surely picked on this insult.*

A – We can see legalisms and publicity stunts in today’s church as well. Without being hurtful and without using names and specifics, what general practices have we seen in the church today that is worthy of critique?

- Can you describe a time when you personally have been guilty of being legalistic?  
What did the Lord show you upon that realization? How has it changed you today?

I - What is John implying in the difference between his baptism with water and the coming Jesus baptism of fire and spirit?

*It highlights that John is indeed “lesser”, but further, the “fire” imagery proclaims that Jesus is the final Judge and Promised Messiah.*

### **Conclusion: Jesus’ Baptism**

O – After reading verse 13, what can we see from the relationship between John and Jesus?

I – Why does Jesus want to be baptized by John? Why does John eventually relent?

*It is worth noting that not only do we get to identify with the work of Jesus in baptism, but Jesus’ baptism allows Him to identify with us as sinners even though He is holy and sinless. Further, in this scene, Jesus is reenacting a bit of Israel's history, as if he were coming out of Egypt (which was where he was during his infancy to avoid Herod's genocide of the firstborn males). He appears here in the wilderness, receives the Spirit before going deeper for 40 days, reminding us of the 40 years Israel wandered. But with Jesus, His time in the wilderness is spent trusting in the promise, the story of God. And He emerges out of the wilderness to the "Promised Land" ready to show Israel the Father's story.*

I – Jesus tells John that this is proper to “fulfill all righteousness.” Keeping in mind the idea of identification and discipleship, what possible meanings does Jesus have for this?

*Possibilities include:*

- 1. Though He is divine, he, too, desires to live righteously.*
- 2. He, too, wants to be identified with John’s proclamation of the Kingdom and be disassociated with the Pharisees/Sadducees*
- 3. This becomes a model for all believers.*

O – What strikes you about what the “voice from heaven” says?

*Again Isaiah is quoted. This time the voice of heaven echoes Isaiah 42:1, “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations.”*

O – Imagine what went through the minds of those that were gathered: John, the people, the Pharisees/Sadducees, Jesus.

A – For those who have been baptized, share with one another your experience. Who baptized you? And what were the events leading up to your decision? For those baptized as infants, describe its meaning for you looking back on the decision your parent(s) made.

*LC Leaders, be sure to celebrate the convictions of both practices. The New Testament illustrates baptism by immersion and the early church baptized their infants immediately as a form of dedication. Both have been celebrated throughout the history of the Church.*

A – How has this account of Jesus’ baptism and the practice of baptism taken a deeper meaning for you today/tonight?

A – Baptism is seen as an essential practice for the repentant believer in being identified with the work of Christ. How else can we find identity in Christ and list other practices of how we can profess our love for Him?

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Text notes (you can access biblical texts via [www.Biblegateway.com](http://www.Biblegateway.com))

- a. KEY: O = Observation; I = Interpretation; A = Application (or C = Challenge)

Advice to study leaders:

- a. Complement OIA questions with “process questions” (what else? what more? what do others think?).
- b. Remember that people learn best when they discover insights for themselves.
- c. Determine the core questions you’ll ask (know which ones to skip if pressed for time).
- d. Always reword questions in words that are comfortable for you (and, if the question doesn’t make sense to you, then discard it.) You want to “own” each question.
- e. When you ask questions, give people ample time to think and respond. Wait. Take your time; don’t rush people but encourage their participation. And avoid answering your own questions!
- f. Timing/pacing: allocate your time and move forward gently, with a steady pace.
- g. Application: Pace the study to conclude with “difference-making” application.
- h. Secondary texts—use other texts sparingly, even if they are relevant. Such texts will push you into “teaching,” rather than facilitating. It can cause people to feel distracted or de-powered.