

Opening Act

Matthew 3:1-12

Intro

If you have ever been to a major concert, then it is likely that you have seen an ***opening act***...

- The opening act is a lesser known band whose job it is to get crowd ready for the main attraction...

And when the main attraction is ready to take the stage, it is time for the opening act to exit...

- This is the scenario that we have here in Matthew 3 — John the Baptist is the opening act for the Messiah and John is doing his best to get the crowd ready for the Messiah to come on stage...

So, if you would, please follow along as I read the passage that we will be studying this morning...

Matthew 3:1-12 (NKJV)

1 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,

2 and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

3 For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying:

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the LORD;

Make His paths straight.'"

4 Now John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.

5 Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him

6 and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

8 Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance,

9 and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.

10 And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

11 I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

12 His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Now, as we move into Matthew 3, we move forward in time 25+ years and encounter the public ministry of John the Baptist...

1 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,

John the Baptist was given this name, not because he was a member of that denomination, but because he and his disciples baptized people in the Jordan River...

- But John did more than baptize — we are told in vs 1 that he **came preaching in the wilderness of Judea...**

preaching — *to herald or proclaim something publicly; to make an official announcement...*

If we are to truly understand the ministry of John the Baptist (and the application that we can take from his example) — we must understand that he *came as the herald of another...*

- John did not come with his own agenda — he was simply the opening act — John came to announce that there was another who was taking the stage after him that people were to turn to...

And here we find amazing application for our own short pilgrimage upon the earth...

Like John the Baptist, we have the amazing opportunity to live our lives as the opening act for another —

— To live our lives in such a way as to prepare people to know and follow the Lord Jesus...[expand]

*Now, as we continue studying vs 1, it is also interesting to note that John conducted his ministry in the **wilderness of Judea**...*

This was an out-of-the-way area in southern Israel, northwest of the Dead Sea...

- It may be that John located his ministry in this region as a way of weeding out people who weren't willing to take the effort...

By locating his ministry in the **wilderness of Judea**, it cost people something to come out and participate in John's ministry...

And I believe this connects to the ministry of the Lord Jesus...

Because **all** are invited to become **Jesus' disciples** — **and it is the best possible life** — but it is a challenging path that will cost us something...

Matthew 7:13-14 (NKJV)

13 “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it.

14 Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.

Matthew 16:24-25 (NKJV)

24 Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.

25 For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.”

There is definitely a cost associated with discipleship...

Let's move on now in Matthew 3 to vs...

2 and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

repent — *to change one's mind or purpose; indicates a complete change of attitude, spiritual and moral, towards God...*

Repentance is a change of mind that leads to a change of action...

- [ex. leave Midland to go to Dallas — eventually you see a sign that says **El Paso — 200 miles** / you are going the wrong way / true *repentance* would cause you to exit as soon as possible and start traveling the other way...]

*The people coming out to John had been going the wrong way — they were **thinking wrongly** and that **wrong thinking** led to **wrong doing**...*

Dallas Willard

“As we first turned away from God in our thoughts, so it is in our thoughts that the first movements toward the renovation of the heart occur. Thoughts are the place where we can and must begin to change.”

[ex. change your thinking — change your life...]

Romans 12:2 (NKJV)

...do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

- [expand — our commitment to teaching the Bible — because the Bible will transform our thinking if we allow it to...]

Now, it seems clear to me that John the Baptist wants the people to **repent** — to change their wrong thinking and their wrong direction...

- And he is exhorting them to **repent** because **the kingdom of heaven is at hand**...

[expand — The OT is unashamedly supernatural — God creating the universe and walking in the garden with Adam & Eve / God interacting with the patriarchs, with the prophets, and with all sorts of people...]

So, it seems clear that the **kingdom of heaven** has always been integrated with planet earth to some degree...

But what does John mean when he proclaims that the kingdom of heaven is at hand?...

I understand this to mean that the kingdom of heaven was **present and available in a way that it never had been before**...

And that people were to repent — they were to step away from the kingdoms of their own making and step into the kingdom of heaven...

And this new interaction with the kingdom of heaven was made available through the Lord Jesus Christ...

Colossians 1:13 (NKJV)

[God the Father] has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love...

You see, John the Baptist is the opening act — he was sent to proclaim this new availability of the kingdom of heaven...

The kingdom of heaven is at hand — it is present — it has come near — through the agency of the Lord Jesus Christ...

And the invitation is open — anyone can enter into the kingdom of heaven — right here and right now — through relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ...[expand]

- So, it is vital that we understand that the Lord Jesus — *the King of the Kingdom of Heaven* — brought His kingdom near — and all who trust in Him enter into His kingdom...

Unfortunately, we have been taught that the **kingdom of heaven** is something that we will experience only after we die...

- This leaves us more or less like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness — sure, we see some supernatural things here and there — but we will not enter the Promised Land...

With this sort of thinking we are left to our own devices here on earth — trying to occupy our time with this and that until we are finally taken to heaven and then life will begin...

But this is not the teaching of the New Testament...

If you are a believer *then you have entered the kingdom of heaven* — *you are a kingdom citizen* with all the rights and privileges that affords you...

But as citizens of the kingdom, we get to choose how we will live in the kingdom...

Will we submit to the true King and live our lives for His glory, empowered by the resources that He provides?...

- ***Or will we seek to establish our own kingdoms and use what the true King provides for our own glory...***

I believe that these are the fundamental questions that explain the weak state of professing Christianity...

Somewhere along the way, Christians have lost sight of the fundamental realities of the kingdom of heaven — so here are five such realities that I hope you and I will take to heart...

1) The kingdom of heaven is available — right here and right now to anyone who will submit to Christ as King...

2) Christ is the undisputed King of this kingdom — it is rebellion to seek any other kingdom...

3) The Triune God has provided all the resources needed for us to live as faithful kingdom citizens right here and right now...

4) Though the kingdom of heaven is present here and now — the kingdom has not come in its fulness — we await the return of Christ the King for the fulness of the kingdom...

5) We are to live as kingdom citizens in the midst of the evil kingdoms of this world — realizing that our stay here is short — and that we will receive an eternal reward for our faithful service...

Now, it seems certain that will return to this theme of the kingdom of heaven again and again as we make our way through the gospel of Matthew...

For now, let's move on in Matthew 3 to vs...

3 For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying:

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the LORD;

Make His paths straight.'"

*Matthew, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is informing us that John the Baptist was the forerunner prophesied by **Isaiah** in Isaiah 40:3...*

- [expand — role of forerunners to a king — preparing the way so that the king could have a suitable path to travel...]

[ex. modern dignitaries having a secured route prepared for them...]

John the Baptist was the opening act — the forerunner — he prepared the way for the Lord Jesus by calling people to repent...

- By notifying them that the kingdom of heaven was at hand — and by stepping aside when the Lord Jesus came on the stage...

I believe we would be wise to emulate the ministry of John the Baptist by preparing a way for people to meet the Lord Jesus...

- [expand — when you know someone and you want to introduce them to someone else — you know what to do...]

*Now, something else that is important to notice in vs 3 is the fact that the **LORD** — Yahweh — is the One for whom John is preparing the way...*

This is clear reference to the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ...
[expand]

Continuing on to vs...

4 Now John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.

John was an unmistakable character — he ate an all organic diet of locusts and honey and he wore sustainable clothing made of camel's hair accented with a hand-crafted leather belt...

- The gospels tell us that John came in the spirit and power of Elijah and he seemed to favor the same fashion as that most famous prophet of the OT...

[expand — some may be called to this sort of ascetic lifestyle / John and Jesus had very different ministries but they were both obedient to what God called them to...]

Continuing on in Matthew 3 to vs 5-6...

**5 Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him
6 and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.**

A spiritual awakening takes place as people from the surrounding regions come out to be baptized by John in the Jordan River...

- And John's baptism was a baptism of repentance — the people were expressing their need for forgiveness and their desire to be forgiven and then go out and do life differently...[expand]

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism,

Pharisees — *experts in the law — or at least in their interpretation of the law — generally legalistic in their interpretations...*

Sadducees — *were in charge of the priesthood and the Temple — they were the theological liberals of their day, denying the supernatural...*

These two groups are most likely coming out to see what the excitement is all about — and to see if John the Baptist is going to be bad for business...

REMINDER — *A true work of God will always stir up the existing religious establishment — and the existing religious establishment will not want to be stirred up...*

- And this happens in our own lives — we may like how we are doing things — but the Lord wants to stir us up and do something new — He has a change of plans...[expand]

Continuing on in vs 7 we read...

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

With the words **brood of vipers** — John is using imagery of a family of snakes that are fleeing from a fire in an effort to escape...

- This seems like cruel language but John is simply being truthful...

[ex. Jesus saying to Peter — “get behind me Satan”...]

This is an important remind that telling the hard truth is actually the best thing that we can do for other people — and as we continue on, John will continue telling hard truths...

8 Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance,

This is an excellent exhortation that John gives to the religious leaders...

John is essentially saying, “Don’t just come out here to observe or to just go through the motions — if you are coming to me then **bear fruits worthy of repentance...**

- ***VITAL TRUTH — repentance is only revealed by the fruit that it produces...***

[ex. if a person says they are a carpenter then let’s see some cabinets or book shelves or some other woodworking...]

John continues in vs...

9 and do not think to say to yourselves, We have Abraham as our father.'

The Pharisees and Sadducees were not to trust in their genetics to get them into right relationship with God...

- [expand — God has no grandchildren — everyone must have their own personal relationship with God...]

For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.

- [expand — stones are gentiles? — big idea is that anyone who trusts in God is a child of Abraham...]

For more on this subject, please turn to...

Galatians 3:5-9 (NKJV)

5 Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?—

6 just as Abraham “believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”

7 Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham.

8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.”

9 So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.

Please turn back to Matthew 3 as we move into vs...

10 And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Here John issues a frightening warning to those who have failed to place their faith in the true and living God — if things do not change then judgment will fall...

The image of the trees is instructive — a fruit tree does not exist for its own sake — it exists to bear fruit for the enjoyment of its owner — then and only then does the fruit tree fulfill its purpose...

- If the fruit tree refuses to bear fruit — if it refuses to fulfill the only purpose for which it was created — then it will eventually be cut down and used for firewood...

And the application is clear — human beings were created to be in right relationship with the God who made them — to bear fruit for His enjoyment — and a refusal to fulfill this role will result in judgment and destruction...

The best possible life for a fruit tree is to bear good fruit — that fulfills the purpose of the fruit tree...

Likewise, the best possible life for a human being is to walk with God, living out the good works that we were created to produce...

Ephesians 2:10 (NKJV)

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

John continues in vs...

11 I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

John the Baptist recognizes that he has a job to do but he recognizes that he is not the boss — he is not the most important piece of the puzzle — he is just the opening act...

- [expand — humility is recognizing the truth — the part you play...]

I believe that John was so useful because he understood his role — he understood that he was simply a servant...

- [expand — **baptize you with the Holy Spirit** (at Pentecost) / **fire** — refining or judgment?]....

Now to the final verse of our study...

12 His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

- [expand on imagery of separating the wheat from the chaff — only two choices — barn or fire — salvation or judgment...]

Conclusion

We will stop here for today and Lord-willing pick up in vs 13 next week...

And I will close with three application questions...

1) Are we willing to be the opening act in people's lives — to introduce people to the Lord Jesus and then allow Him to take center stage?...

2) Are we willing to live in the kingdom of heaven, here and now, letting go of our own fallen kingdoms?...

3) Are we willing to fulfill our purpose and walk out those good works that we were created to produce?...