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MATTHEW

The Wilderness Prophet
Matthew 03

Mat 3:1 (25 – 30 years after the end of chapter 2) 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.

- I. Introduction
 - a. Not only faith like a child but curiosity like a child
 - i. We all remember the “Why?” stage
 1. We lose that as we get older – pride, exhaustion
 - ii. Familiarity can stifle curiosity
 - iii. Take a lot for granted in this passage – encouragement to study this text and the gospel of Matthew with fresh eyes
 - b. Ask questions
 - i. Why is John in the wilderness?
 - ii. Why is he dressed like that?
 - iii. Why is he eating bugs?
 - iv. Why are crowds traveling to see him?
 - v. Why is he baptizing people?
 1. Seek answers – dig deep – be curious
- II. John in the Wilderness
 - a. Matthew introduces John abruptly: *“In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea.”*
 - i. He gives us no backstory, assumes his audience is already familiar with John
 - ii. One thing he does point out - he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah
 - b. In the Wilderness of Judea
 - i. Why the wilderness? Why not Jerusalem? Why not the Temple?
 1. Because the location itself is a message.
 - ii. This is a silent critique: God’s new thing is not centered in the temple establishment, but out in the wilderness through the prophetic word.
 1. God’s new thing is not centered in the religious establishment
 2. It begins outside of all of that
 - iii. Hasn’t that already been established?
 1. Magi, baby Jesus, born in Bethlehem, fleeing to Egypt
 2. All of this not quite what the Jews expected – they were familiar with the prophecies, the stories of the coming Messiah – but were they really ready?
 - iv. The wilderness remind us of:

1. The Exodus
 - a. When people went out to John, they were leaving towns, synagogues, and the ordinary routines of life
 - b. Reenacting Israel's Exodus journey in a small way
2. God's past faithfulness
 - a. A place of testing and encountering God
 - b. A place of new beginnings and covenant relationship
- c. Clothing: Camel's Hair and a Leather Belt
 - i. These are not random unimportant details
 1. ***2 Kings 1: 6 So they said to him, "A man came up to meet us, and said to us, 'Go, return to the king who sent you, and say to him, "Thus says the Lord: 'Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are sending to inquire of Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron? Therefore you shall not come down from the bed to which you have gone up, but you shall surely die.' " " " 7 Then he said to them, "What kind of man was it who came up to meet you and told you these words?" 8 So they answered him, "A hairy man (a garment of hair) wearing a leather belt around his waist." And he said, "It is Elijah the Tishbite."***
 2. Last words God spoke through the prophet Malachi before 400 years of prophetic silence – ***Mal 4:5 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. 6 And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse."***
 - a. An Angel Announces the Birth of John the Baptist – ***Luke 1:17 He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."***
 - ii. John was visually presenting himself as the promised one who would prepare the way for the Lord/Messiah.
 1. John was from a priestly family (his father Zechariah was a priest: Luke 1:5) - He dresses in rough, prophetic clothing, not priestly robes.
 - a. Uncomfortable, coarse, and humble.
- d. His food was locusts and wild honey
 - i. "Of them you may eat: the locust ... the bald locust, the cricket, and the grasshopper." (Leviticus 11:22)
 1. He deliberately chooses a diet that is simple, lawful, and available in the wilderness.
 2. Signify a life dependent on God's direct provision
 - ii. Separated himself from many religious leaders: living in cities, concerned with status, social standing, finer things in life.
 1. ***Mat 11:18 For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' 19 The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a winebibber..."***

III. The Audience, Message, and Method

- a. The audience - Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went to see him
 - i. Location was inconvenient, His message was harsh, and he was a bit strange

- ii. Make ministry consultants very uncomfortable – yet people came from all over to hear his message
 - 1. What drew people to him?
- iii. How did Malachi end?
 - 1. Malachi 3:1 — a messenger preparing the way of the Lord.
 - 2. Malachi 4:5 — Elijah coming before the “great and awesome day of the LORD.”
 - 3. Isaiah 40:3 — “A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD...’”
 - a. It had been 400 years since any direct revelation from God and people knew the prophecies
- iv. Consider the cultural climate for the average Jew
 - 1. First-century Judea lived under:
 - a. Roman occupation — political frustration, longing for deliverance.
 - b. Religious tension — Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, each claiming to know the way.
 - c. Corruption and hypocrisy among some religious leaders (which Jesus later denounces)
 - 2. Many ordinary Jews probably felt spiritually dry, burdened by the law and empty religion, longing for something real, something alive
 - a. And then someone shows up outside of the religious establish, outside of the religious systems, looks nothing like the religious leader – looks more like a prophet of old and he speaks with prophetic authority
 - b. Exposing sin, calling people to repentance
 - c. And it’s clear he has no interest in power, status, or approval
 - d. People flock to him
 - 3. Listen to what Jesus said in *Matt 11:7 As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. 9 But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. 10 For this is he of whom it is written: ‘Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.’ 11 “Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*
- b. What was the message?
 - i. “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” - prophet Isaiah wrote - He is the one crying out in the wilderness - ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.
 - 1. The King is coming! Get ready – clear the road
 - a. There is clean and then there is we have guests coming over clean
 - b. What did John mean by this? How do you prepare the way?
- c. The method
 - i. Baptism and confession
 - 1. Baptism was not new. Jews practiced washings for ritual purity. Gentiles converting to Judaism were baptized

2. But John's baptism was different. It wasn't about temple worship, it wasn't about conversion – it was about the Kingdom of God – it was about preparing hearts to receive the King
 - a. A prepared heart is a repentant heart
 - b. A John gave them a public opportunity to respond
- ii. The baptism took place in the Jordan River - Over a thousand years before, the children of Israel had crossed the Jordan when they first entered and began the conquest of the promised land.
 1. Now they were in that river again, as a sign that they were getting ready for a greater conquest, God's defeat of all evil and the establishment of his kingdom on earth as in heaven.

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."

IV. Pharisees and Sadducees

a. Background

i. Pharisees

1. Experts in the law - They carefully observed the written Law of Moses
2. They also upheld the Oral Law (traditions of the elders), which they believed was given to Moses at Sinai alongside the written Law and passed down through generations
 - a. They believed in applying purity laws (originally for priests) to all Jews, especially regarding food and ritual washing.
 - b. They were often scribes, scholars, and teachers in synagogues.

ii. Sadducees

1. They accepted only the written Torah (the first five books of Moses) as divinely authoritative
2. They rejected the Oral Law and the traditions of the elders, which put them in direct opposition to the Pharisees.
3. They were the ruling class, controlling the Temple and its rituals.
 - a. The High Priest was typically a Sadducee.

b. Why did they travel to see John?

i. Curiosity and Investigation

ii. Fear of Popularity - The Jewish people were looking for a Messiah or a deliverer. John had obviously gathered large crowds and spoke of God's imminent kingdom

1. Could potentially spark a political uprising against Rome.
2. The Sadducees were specifically motivated to maintain peace with Rome to preserve their political power.

iii. Religious Duty/Seeking God

1. Unfair to say all were insincere. Some may have genuinely been seeking God and were drawn by the powerful message of repentance
- iv. Maintaining Appearances - public opinion mattered
- c. John's Harsh Words
 - i. "Brood of vipers!"
 1. A family of desert snakes - In the wilderness where vipers actually lived, this would have hit especially hard
 2. "Brood" stresses ancestry – family – poisonous/deadly.
 - a. Offspring of the serpent
 3. Harsh words for the religious elite
 - ii. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?
 1. Repent, the kingdom of heaven is near - comes with the wrath of God
 2. John sees these men as snakes slithering out of the brush as it begins to burn
 3. "You are here out of self-preservation, not genuine repentance."
 - iii. bear fruits worthy of repentance
 1. Repentance - more than emotion; it must yield fruit — acts of justice, mercy, and humility (Isaiah 58; Micah 6:8).
 2. The Pharisees prided themselves on their purity; they were unlikely to be guilty of obvious sins.
 - a. Their pride was getting in the way, and their arrogance towards other Israelites, let alone towards the rest of the world
 - iv. do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.'
 1. Pride was rooted in their ancestry
 2. "I'm safe because I'm Jewish" - Covenant privilege without covenant obedience is meaningless.
 - v. God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.
 1. The play on Hebrew/Aramaic sounds (banim = children; 'abanim = stones)
 2. He can create a new covenant family out of the rocks by their feet – God can and will bring into the fold whoever He chooses to
 - vi. 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
 1. Something new, turning point in human history
 2. Judgment is not distant; the axe touches the root, the root (not branches) signals total removal of unfruitful trees
 - a. Was John's message one of hope and forgiveness or one of wrath and judgement? Yes! Prepares us for Jesus' message

V. He's On His Way

- a. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance
 - i. Describes who comes after Him:
 - ii. mightier than I
 1. I'm just the opening act, the main event is on His way
 2. I must decrease, He must increase
 - iii. whose sandals I am not worthy to carry
 1. Not worthy to be His servant
 2. Gulf between John and Jesus
 3. Don't be impressed with me
 - iv. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.....and fire

1. Two baptisms - the Coming One's baptism is decisive and internal—either purifying (Spirit-empowered new birth) or consuming (fire of judgment). The leaders must choose which side of that baptism they will experience.
 - a. A message not preached today
- v. 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.
 1. Harvest time:
 - a. Wheat and chaff tossed into the air,
 - b. Wind blows away the light chaff,
 - c. Heavy kernels fall and are gathered.
 2. There's no neutral ground. Encountering the Coming One means:
 - a. You become wheat, gathered into God's barn (kingdom),
 - b. Or you remain chaff, destined for judgment

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. 14 And John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?" 15 But Jesus answered and said to him, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he allowed Him. 16 When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. 17 And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

- b. The Unexpected Arrival
 - i. John builds to this – a man from Galilee asking John to baptize him
 - ii. This was not what the people were expecting
 1. Jesus – identifying with mankind, in humility, identifying with the people on the shores – not because He was sinful but because He would take on their sins
 2. Jesus will continue to surprise them, maybe even disappoint them – but their expectations were too earthly, their aim was too low
 - iii. This was God's beloved Son, in whom He is well pleased