

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

G. Campbell Morgan, D.D.

Copyright © 1929

CHAPTER FOUR

MATTHEW 3:1-12

AT the commencement of this passage we read, “**In those days**,” but the reference is not necessarily one of immediate time. Matthew takes the story up after thirty years have elapsed, and gives us no details of the happenings of that period. A generation has passed away since we saw Jesus carried to Nazareth as He returned from Egypt.

The time of the showing of the King is approaching; the hour at which He must be manifested to His people; the hour at which He is coming forth from privacy to publicity. He will cease to tread the lowly, patient pathway of a subject merely, and will begin to exercise His authority by declaring His manifesto, by exhibiting the benefits of His kingdom, and by finally moving to His Cross and Throne. But before His manifestation, His herald is seen, and it is with the herald that we have to do in this passage.

Let us, then, look at the herald himself.

- Let us consider the ministry he exercised among the Hebrew people.
- Let us finally consider his Christian ministry that is, the ministry by which he linked the old economy to the new; culminating one dispensation, and uttering the word which indicated the commencement of the new movement.

In the first four verses the man himself is presented to our view. The key-note of his ministry is struck; but we are principally occupied with the man.

Let us look at the man:

- First according to the old-time prophecy (ver. 3).
- Secondly let us see the man as he appeared to his day and generation (ver. 4).
- Finally let us listen to the key-note of his ministry (ver. 2).

First, then, the man, according to prophecy.

Here again the Hebrew evangelist, writing specifically from the Hebrew standpoint, linked the coming of John with the prophecies of the past. Turn to the prophecy of Isaiah (ch. 40:3): “**The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.**”

Let us endeavor to keep in view the whole sweep of the prophecy of Isaiah, for we can only grasp individual verses by great outlooks. We shall only see where this quotation fits into the ministry of Jesus Christ, as we attempt to fasten upon our minds what this prophecy teaches. Leaving any discussion of the unity of the authorship of Isaiah, but remembering that it is a unified message, there will be manifest a very distinct method.

The book falls naturally into three great divisions.

There are first thirty-five chapters, constituting a great movement; of judgment pronounced, shot through again and again, as all the Hebrew prophecies are, with the light of mercy, and the gleaming glory of infinite grace, that for evermore enwraps the judgment of God. The great subject of this first division is judgment.

- The prophet first of all utters an impeachment of the nation, with strange, alarming, and terrible denunciation of the condition of God's ancient people.
- Then moving on, he tells the story of how he was called and commissioned to his work.

In those chapters are two movements of judgment:

- First, the judgment of the chosen people on account of their failure;
- Secondly, the judgment of the nations.

Then there is a small division in the heart of the prophecy, chapters 36-39, four chapters only, which may be called historic; corresponding with the story in some of the historic books of the Bible. In these the prophet describes the condition of affairs in his own time, and so explains the great burden of judgment that he has been compelled to utter.

Then at chapter 40 commences the supreme message of the Book of Isaiah, that for which all the rest has been necessarily preparatory.

In Isaiah, as in every Hebrew prophecy, judgment is not the final word, and the prophet breaks out, **“Comfort ye, comfort ye My people, saith your God.”** Then, as if he were listening to something that was not to come for centuries after for an inspired man has not only keen vision, but acute hearing he says, without naming the man, **“The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”**

The prophet has heard the cry afar off before anyone else has heard it. It is a voice in the desert; but he understands it, he knows what it means, and in a moment he begins,

“Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain;” and the majestic description of issues moves on through chapters 40 and 41, and everything moves forward to chapter 42. **“Behold My Servant, Whom I uphold; Mine elect, in Whom My soul delighteth.”** From that moment the prophecy centers in, and proceeds through, that Servant of the Lord.

We shall find presently in Matthew's Gospel that he quotes this prophecy of the Servant of the Lord. We stand back from this old prophecy, and turn over to ch. 3 of the Gospel and read, **"In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he that was spoken of through Isaiah the prophet saying, For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."**

The King is coming; the Servant of God that Isaiah described in all the remaining portion of his great book.

John is preaching, and the voice that Isaiah heard with keen, quick hearing, centuries before, is singing in the wilderness, sounding over the Jordan, through the region round Jerusalem, through Judaea, penetrating to the heart of the metropolis Jerusalem. It is the voice that foretells the advent of the Kingdom of heaven, when **"Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low."**

The voice announces the new age, the new movement; a new age and movement not sentimentally, but personally governed. The Kingdom is at the doors, and the fulfilling of the ancient prophecy, the ministry of John the Baptist commences.

Secondly, let us look at the man as he appeared to his people (ver. 4).

"And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey."

That is all. It is one of those pictures that has very little light and shade from without. There are no fine outlines merging into the shadows and coming up into great light. There was nothing of this in John the Baptist. He was a man severe, ascetic; one burdened with a sense of the sin of his times.

The story of John is a wonderful one. He was born in the priesthood, and therefore for the priesthood. As to how far he and the Boy Jesus knew each other there has been much speculation. This boy John was born in remarkable circumstances. He grew up, coming to young manhood, when he should have taken upon him the vows of the priesthood according to Divine and human arrangements. But elections of the past are set aside, and suddenly the young man, cared for, prayed for, and nurtured in the home of his father, turned his back upon home, and upon the priesthood; and went, for preparation for his work, into the wilderness, and dwelt there until the hour of his manifestation.

There he may have brooded over the story of the past; brooded over the strange conviction within him that told of day-dawn at hand; brooded, if he had known the Boy Jesus, over what he had seen in Him, perchance of simplicity which had astonished him; brooded almost certainly over his mother's story of his own birth, and the birth at the same time of this Boy Jesus. He thought long and in loneliness.

It is quite true that if a man would know something of the sin of his own age, he must live in the midst of his age. But no man has ever spoken against the sin of his age with the authoritative voice of God, who has only lived in the midst of his age. He must also see it from the distance. This man went into the wilderness, and suddenly, without warning, he broke upon the whole nation; a great voice, ringing over the mountains and plains.

Thirdly, what was his message?

“Repent” Change your minds. This word, Repent, was the key-note of Jesus’ teaching. This is radical, revolutionary. A man comes out of the wilderness, and looks into the faces of the village-folk, of the suburban people, of the metropolitan people, and he says: Repent; you are all wrong; wrong at the heart and core of things; wrong in your seeing, and therefore in your doing.

But the reason is, that the **“Kingdom of heaven is at hand.”** The **“Kingdom of heaven”** was a current phrase of Jewish speech, which is almost peculiar to the Gospel of Matthew, representing a perpetual consciousness in Jewish thinking.

“The Kingdom of heaven” the theocracy, the Divine government, the heavenly Order. In earthly life the authority of God exercised among men. Now, said this strange ascetic preacher as he came, This Kingdom is at hand. The ideal your fathers have cherished is about to be realized in your midst, and you are not ready for it. **“Repent,”** change your minds.

It was a great word and a great message, delivered with no tone of tenderness judging from the records which, while meager, are yet sufficient. There was never a tone of tenderness about John until he saw Jesus; and then the stern ascetic became full of tenderness as he used the greatest phrase of the spirit of tenderness: **“Behold, the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.”** But until the great Sin-bearer came, John was the sin-bearer in his own consciousness; the sin of the nation was on his heart. He was the most magnificent in many ways of all the long line of prophets, with an awful monotony in his message **“Repent ye, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.”**

Yet his message to the Hebrew people is given a little more fully. We have only so far looked at the key-note. Now look at ver. 5. **“Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, - offspring, genus, kin - who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”**

And yet he did not turn them back. He did not say they could not flee. He did not say their repentance was not genuine; but he told them what to do.

“Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.”

Such is the brief analysis of the Hebrew ministry of John; and there are three qualities in it.

- First, *it was attractive* “ **Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan;**”
- Secondly, *it was convictive* “**And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins;**”
- Finally, *it was invective*. Against the men who constituted the fountain-head of all Israel’s trouble Pharisees, Sadducees he flung himself in passionate protest.

We sometimes imagine that there is nothing attractive in our ministry, except the winning, wooing note. But there are times when we seem to need again the voice of the herald; and when God finds a John the Baptist and sends him out, his message is full of attractiveness.

This is a great picture of attractiveness, of a man with a note of conviction in his message and authority in the way that he deals with sin.

- He came with no theology;
- He came with no philosophy to discuss;
- He came with no new cult to introduce;
- He did not come to ask men to consider a position which they could accept or reject as they pleased;
- He came with the thundering voice of a great inspiration “**Repent;**”
- His message of God’s authority stirred every place, and every one.

Thank God it is true to-day. We do not need one Gospel for the city, and another for the suburbs, and another for the country. Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the villages need the same message. Before Jesus come, John the Baptist must come to the city, and suburbs, and country; and as his message is heard there will be attractiveness in it.

Then notice, his message was convictive. At least men acknowledged the truth externally, and submitted to the baptism which was a symbol of their repentance.

Of course it all fell short there. It can never be any more than that. John Baptist can never communicate life. Coming after him is the Sin-bearer, the great tender-hearted King of men, Who does not only produce repentance, but gives life. If we are convinced of sin, thank God for it, but it is not enough.

The crowds that thronged the banks of the Jordan, and went down into its waters of baptism, which was a baptism of repentance, were very sincere; but to accept Jesus there must be something more than this.

Once again, notice the invective note in his preaching.

Now the leaders were responsible Pharisees and Sadducees.

- The Pharisee was a ritualist;
- The Sadducee a rationalist.

The Pharisee believed in all supernatural things, but imagined that they could be expressed in external things, and that is always the story of ritualism. The Sadducees did not believe in angel, spirit, or resurrection. They were rationalists, old and hard.

These are the forces that damn a people, that blight a nation.

John saw them coming; the ritualists and the rationalists, who with their splendid observance of externalities and their inward corruptness of life, had blighted the whole nation. And John said with roughness, **“Who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come,”** ye kin of vipers? And then, as if he had said: You have come, and you say you repent; but by you, more than by all others, must be manifested the reality of your repentance. **“Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance;”** trust no longer in your physical relationship to Abraham **“God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.”**

What a message it was!

It must have burned and scorched these men. The more one studies it the more glad one is that Jesus’ ministry of renewing followed. Thank God that the message to-day is that of this blessed King!

Notice what John said about the King, for after all it is the supreme matter.

“And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.”

It is a wonderful message! God help us to catch its notes.

The first thing that John testifies, is to the coming One, and he says two things of Him:

- First, He is supreme in His Person;
- Secondly, He is supreme in His work.

There is a humility about this; there is a touch of modesty in it; and the difference between a real humility and a mock humility, we all know. *Real humility never knows it is humble; mock humility is proud of its humility.*

“He that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear.”

John was quite right. We will take Another’s estimate of John: **“Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist.”** This is what the King said of him, and this is true also. And yet, greatest of women born, said the King, he was not worthy to bear the shoes of the King. This is quite true. There is a supreme difference in their work. We need not describe the difference between the two men - the rugged and rough prophet, and the magnificent and majestic King, Whose very gentleness is mightier than the hurricane of His herald. **“Thy gentleness hath made me great.”**

The contrast is not only in the persons; it is in their work.

“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He that cometh after me is mightier than I . . . He shall baptize you in the Holy Ghost and with fire.”

I lead you to the external symbol of your repentance; He shall overwhelm you in the fire-whelming of the Holy Ghost, that burns your sin out of you, and re-makes you. I have to do, said John, with the external thing water, that which can only touch the surface of things; He shall work with fire, that which shall go through everything.

That is the difference between Jesus and John to-day.

If we listen to the message of John only, we shall be busy with water-baptism and washing. But if we listen to the message of Jesus, the fire will burn, and burn to purity, and burn to realization, and burn to crowning.

The work of Jesus is superior to the work of John.

Listen to what John says about His methods.

This is to be a strange and wonderful King Who is coming. He is to be destructive and constructive in His method; and His victories are to be destructive and constructive.

His methods of destruction are, **“the axe,” “the fan,” and “the fire.”** **“The axe is laid unto the root of the trees,”** said John. It is ready. He is coming, and His **“fan is in His hand,”** the fan that winnows. And the fire will burn.

But His methods are constructive. He shall baptize you with fire; He shall cleanse the threshing-floor, not destroy it, and He will **“gather His wheat into the garner.”**

Mark the contrast.

The axe at the root of the trees for destruction for the cutting off of the fruitless; the fan for scattering the chaff; the fire for immediately devouring the chaff. But mark the constructive work. The fire is for cleansing and energy; the cleansing of the threshing-floor, that perfect work may go forward, and the garnering and the gathering in of the wheat. It is the same thing, and the same instrument that does two opposite things.

The fan drives away the chaff, leaving the wheat. The fire burns up the thing that cannot stand its fierce flame; and perfects that which can bear the flame. And so the King Who comes is to be destructive and constructive - destructive, for the fruitless tree is to be hewn down; the chaff is to be driven away and burnt, constructive, for the threshing-floor is to be cleansed; the wheat is to be gathered and garnered, and men are to be fire-baptized. Nineteen centuries have gone since this rugged prophet heralded the coming of the King. The work of Jesus has proceeded in human history for nineteen centuries on exactly the lines he laid down.

Jesus Christ has always been the King of destruction and construction.

Glance back; think of the centuries, and think of the influence of Jesus in the centuries. What has He done? Oh! the things He has burnt up. Oh! the things He has built. Always fanning, and chaff is flung before it; always a gatherer, and the wheat is being garnered. It is so to-day. The axe of Jesus lies at the root of the tree that is fruitless. The winnowing fan of Christ is at work; the chaff must go.

Do you imagine that after all the chaff is going to submerge the wheat, and fruitless trees crowd out the fruit-bearing vines of God? Then you do not know the King. His fan is in His hand, and if we live on the mountains of God, we shall feel the wind of God which blows and scatters things which must go.

The question of importance for us, for our work in the little day God allows us to live, is this: Am I chaff, or wheat? Is the work I am doing chaff or wheat? If I am chaff, His wind will blow me to the unquenchable fire; but if I am wheat, He will gather me, and garner me. So with my work, and with everything.

~ end of chapter 4 ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
