

Bible Study Guide: Week of 11-28-2022

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

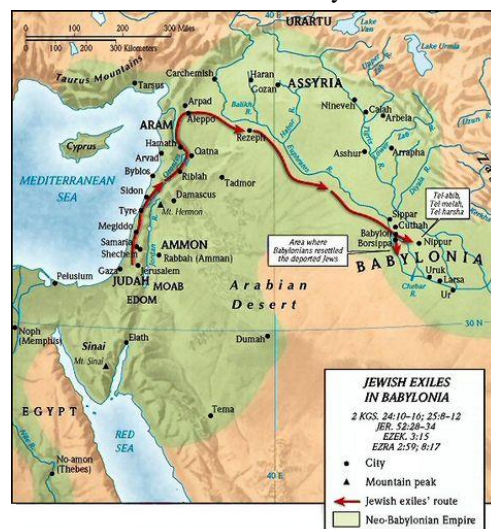
Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” ⁴Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

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John the Baptist is described as “the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke.” This attribution refers to Isaiah 40:3, which reads: “A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” As you can see, Matthew takes a bit of liberty with his quote, but the essence remains the same. Isaiah was writing to people living in exile in Babylon around 539-538 BC—more than 500 years before the birth of Jesus. Was Isaiah really sitting with his scroll and writing about John the Baptist? Likely not. Instead, Isaiah was looking at the geography that separated the captives in Babylon from their original home in Judea. As you can see on the map to the right, the Babylonian empire was centered in what is today Iraq. Nestled between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the capital city of Babylon was separated from Judea by the vast Syrian and Jordanian wildernesses. So untraversable and inhospitable was this region that the exiles were taken to Babylon via a crescent-shaped route that took them North into modern-day Syria along the Jordan River and then turned east-southeast along the Euphrates. They presumably returned by this same route. Isaiah’s prophecy, then, was initially intended to encourage and comfort those living in Babylon who longed for God to make a new highway to facilitate their safe return to their homeland.



In John the Baptist, Matthew evidently perceived a new fulfillment of the prophecy that Isaiah once spoke. Now, instead of preparing a way for God's people to be set free from exile, the way was being prepared for the coming of Jesus to set the people free from sin.

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The description of John's clothing is similar to the description of the appearance of Elijah in 2 Kings 1:8. In Malachi 4:5, the Lord promises that Elijah's reappearance would come before the "day of the Lord." Therefore, John's being identified as one like Elijah likely explains why so many people went out to see him and hear his message.

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In Luke's version of this story, John addresses "the crowds" as "a brood of vipers;" in Matthew's version it is only the Pharisees and Sadducees—members of religious factions that are portrayed in the gospels as opposed to Jesus' ministry and/or as those who "test" Jesus—that are addressed as such. Unlike in Luke's version of John's preaching John doesn't give advice to various groups in the crowd. He only addresses the Pharisees and Sadducees, warning them to bear fruit worthy of repentance and to avoid relying on bloodlines and ancestry for salvation. These statements anticipate later clashes that will come in the gospel story between Jesus and these religious factions.

¹⁰Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Here John stresses the urgent need for a change in behavior and attitude among his hearers—"Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees..." The trees are often taken as images representing individual people or sinners—those who do not bear good fruit are unrepentant sinners. We've all probably heard a fire and brimstone message like this before. We might, however, envision the trees as representing parts of each of us. The parts that need to be pruned away and purified will indeed be laid bare by John's message and Jesus' coming ministry. John's witness is consistent in all four gospels: He baptizes with water; one is coming more powerful who will baptize with the Spirit and fire; John is unworthy to even handle this coming one's sandals. Just like the image of the trees, often we view this metaphor John uses as parallel to the parable of the wheat and the tares where we often assume the wheat grains are good people and the chaff are bad people. Again, we might see each of our lives as a whole plant of wheat—Jesus is coming to remove what is not needed in our lives and to gather us in after making us pure and holy.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. If John came today, what reaction do you think he would receive? Why?**
- 2. Why do you think John's message was so appealing that people from all over the region went out to see him and be baptized? Why do you think the Pharisees and Sadducees were going out to hear him?**
- 3. What might it look like for us for Jesus to separate the wheat and chaff or to cut down the unproductive trees among us?**