

### Lesson 3 . . . Repentance and Divine Sonship

# Gospel of Matthew

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## ***Suggested responses to questions about Matthew 3:1-17***

**Note: Be sure to respond to all the questions yourself before reading the suggested responses in order to make the most of this study.**

1. 2 Samuel 7:8b-14a records the terms of the covenant God made with David: “I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel; . . . and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in their own place, and be disturbed no more; . . . and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your son after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son.” Under the law of Moses, the Israelites viewed holiness in a somewhat legalistic fashion as a separation from uncleanness and from the unclean nations that would drag them into unclean practices. When God establishes a covenant with David, instead of being quarantined from the Gentiles, David is given a kingdom whose purpose appears to be to infect the neighboring Gentiles with holiness and a sincere love of God. In Isaiah 60:1-3, the prophet announces God’s intention to re-establish the Davidic kingdom for the descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel, a kingdom that will serve as a light to the nations: “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.” In 1 Samuel 13:14b, the prophet Samuel speaks to the disobedient king Saul about David, the one God anointed king to replace Saul: “[T]he LORD has sought out a man after his own heart; and the LORD has appointed him to be prince over his people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you.”
2. By referring to the kingdom of heaven instead of the kingdom of God, Matthew is being sensitive to his Jewish readers, who reverence the holy name of God. The Jews of Jesus’ time were looking for a king who would free them from Roman rule and re-establish them as a great nation such as they were during the time of David. John 6:15 describes Jesus’ reluctance to be viewed as a political leader: “Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the hills by himself.” Paragraph 541 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “‘To carry out the will of the Father Christ inaugurated the kingdom of heaven on earth.’ Now the Father’s will is ‘to raise up men to share in his own divine life.’ He does this by gathering men around his Son Jesus Christ. This gathering is the Church, ‘on earth the seed and beginning of that kingdom.’”

### **Matthew Lesson 3 Suggested Responses**

3. The beginning of the section known as the “Book of Consolations” in the book of the prophet Isaiah is directed to the survivors of the Babylonian Captivity and contains restoration prophecies that announce God’s intention to re-establish his Davidic kingdom for the descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel. In Isaiah 40:10, the prophet promises the coming of the Messiah: “Behold, the Lord God comes with might.” *Responses to the last part of this question will vary.*
4. 2 Kings 1:8 describes the prophet Elijah as wearing “a garment of haircloth, with a girdle of leather about his loins.” According to Malachi 4:5 (Malachi 3:23 in the New American Bible) the prophet Elijah is expected to return “before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes.” Sirach 48:10 prophesies that “at the appointed time” Elijah would return to “calm the wrath of God before it breaks out in fury, to turn the heart of the father to the son, and to restore the tribes of Jacob.” In Luke 1:16-17, the angel proclaims to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, that his son will “turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will 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 for the Lord a people prepared.” In John 1:21, priests and Levites sent by the Jews in Jerusalem ask John the Baptist: “Are you Elijah?”
5. Numbers 6:1-8 describes a Nazirite vow as a special vow made by a man or a woman “to separate himself to the LORD.” It has three conditions: 1) to abstain from wine or strong drink or anything associated with grapes; 2) to let the hair grow long and not to cut it; 3) to avoid going near a dead body. In Luke 1:15b, the angel tells John the Baptist’s father, Zechariah, that John “shall drink no wine nor strong drink,” which would lead to the conclusion that John the Baptist probably had taken a Nazirite vow.
6. A viper is a snake or serpent. When John the Baptist called the Pharisees and the Sadducees a “brood of vipers” he was associating them with evil doing. Genesis 3:1-15 tells the story of the devil disguised as a serpent and of Adam and Eve’s disobedience in the Garden of Eden. Numbers 21:4-6 describes how God punished the Israelites for grumbling about Moses and Aaron by sending fiery serpents among the people that bit them so that many died. In John 8:39-44a, Jesus speaks to Jews who had told him “Abraham is our father” saying: “If you were Abraham’s children, you would do what Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth which I heard from God; this is not what Abraham did. You do what your father did.” Jesus continues by saying, “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him.” In Romans 9:7-8, St. Paul teaches: “[N]ot all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants. . . . [I]t is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants.”
7. Joshua 3:14-17 describes how the Israelites crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua: “[W]hen those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water, . . . the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap far off, at Adam, the city that is beside

Zarethan, and those flowing down toward the sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, were wholly cut off; and the people passed over opposite Jericho. And while all Israel were passing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan, until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan.” Paragraph 1222 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains: “Baptism is prefigured in the crossing of the Jordan River by which the People of God received the gift of the land promised to Abraham’s descendants, an image of eternal life. The promise of this blessed inheritance is fulfilled in the New Covenant.” The fifth chapter of 2 Kings tells the story of Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria who went to the prophet Elisha to be cured of his leprosy. 2 Kings 5:14 describes how Naaman “went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.” Just as Naaman was cured of his physical disease of leprosy in the water of the Jordan River, so sinners are purified and cured of sin in the waters of Baptism.

8. The baptisms performed by John the Baptist were for repentance and didn’t have the power to save from sin and death like sacramental Baptism instituted by Jesus. Paragraph 720 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that “with John the Baptist, the Holy Spirit begins the restoration to man of ‘the divine likeness,’ prefiguring what he would achieve with and in Christ. John’s baptism was for repentance; baptism in water and the Spirit will be a new birth.” Paragraph 696 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* further explains: “While water signifies birth and the fruitfulness of life given in the Holy Spirit, fire symbolizes the transforming energy of the Holy Spirit’s actions. The prayer of the prophet Elijah, who ‘arose like fire’ and whose ‘word burned like a torch,’ brought down fire from heaven on the sacrifice on Mount Carmel. This event was a ‘figure’ of the fire of the Holy Spirit, who transforms what he touches. John the Baptist, who goes ‘before [the Lord] in the spirit and power of Elijah,’ proclaims Christ as the one who ‘will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.’”
9. In John 1:32-34, John the Baptist testifies: “I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and it remained on him. . . . [H]e who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.’” Genesis 8:8-12 describes how Moses “sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; but the dove found no place to set her foot, and she returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put forth his hand and took her and brought her into the ark with him. He waited another seven days, and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening, and lo, in her mouth a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days, and sent forth the dove; and she did not return to him any more.” In this account of Noah and the flood, the dove’s failure to return indicates it’s safe to leave the ark, and the flood waters that threatened to destroy all life have receded. When the dove descends on Jesus at his baptism, it indicates that Jesus represents a safe haven for Christians, a place where they can find eternal life.

### **Matthew Lesson 3 Suggested Responses**

10. Jesus himself doesn't need cleansing, but he enters into the waters in order to cleanse them and to abolish the outmoded concept that holiness can be contaminated by people and things that are unclean. Jesus, who is sinless and therefore has no need for repentance, enters the waters of baptism at the Jordan River in order to effect the transformation that changes baptism from a symbolic ritual washing into a healing sacrament capable of destroying sin and death. Also, Jesus consistently was obedient to such things as the purification and dedication in the Temple, going to Jerusalem for feasts, etc. Jesus' baptism serves as preparation before he begins his ministry. Paragraph 1262 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that the two principal effects of Baptism "are purification from sins and new birth in the Holy Spirit." Paragraph 1257 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: "The Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation. He also commands his disciples to proclaim the Gospel to all nations and to baptize them. Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament. The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude; this is why she takes care not to neglect the mission she has received from the Lord to see that all who can be baptized are 'reborn of water and the Spirit.' *God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments.*"

*Responses to the Questions for Reflection will vary.*