

WHY FOUR GOSPELS? THE FOUR-FOLD PORTRAIT OF CHRIST

in
Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

By

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CHAPTER THREE

THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN AS “AT HAND”

Matthew 3:1 — 4:25

The Herald of the King and His Message

Matthew 3:1-12.

1. In the ministry of John the Baptist, another Old Testament prophecy was fulfilled:

“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” (Isaiah 40:3, written 712 B.C)..

“This is he (John) 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” (Matthew 3:3).

A careful reading of the passage in Isaiah, from which this quotation was taken, reveals that the prophet was writing of the coming of Israel’s King, in that day when “**the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it**” (Isaiah 40:5). The herald of the King was to go before Him. He came in the person of John the Baptist; and his message was,

“**Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand**” (Matthew 3:2).

As John preached, saying to Israel that her King and His kingdom were “**at hand**,” he was preparing “**the way of the Lord**,” teaching that, insofar as God had then revealed, nothing intervened before the King of Israel was to be established on His throne; no prophecy remained to be fulfilled. Accordingly, the King Himself did come, preaching the same message, and saying,

“**Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand**” (Matthew 4:17).

He went about **“all Galilee . . . preaching the gospel of the kingdom”** (Matthew 4:23); and shortly afterwards He sent forth the twelve disciples, saying:

“Go . . . to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 10:6, 7).

While all four of the evangelists tell of the ministry of John the Baptist, only Matthew mentions these two passages:

“Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

“Go . . . to the lost sheep of the house of Israel . . .” The reason is plain, if we remember that Matthew was writing particularly for the Jews. Their King and His kingdom were **“at hand.”** God knew, from all eternity, that Israel would reject her King, and that this church age would run its course; nevertheless, He offered Himself to His chosen people; and while He was in their midst, until He was officially rejected by the nation, His kingdom was **“at hand.”**

“The wilderness,” where John preached, was in Judea; and his message was to God’s covenant people; but he did not identify himself with the degenerate system of Judaism that prevailed in Jerusalem.

“The wilderness” reminds us of the barrenness of Israel’s spiritual life, and John was faithful in warning the false leaders of the nation to **“flee from the wrath to come.”** John’s baptism confirmed his preaching; for it was **“unto repentance”** in the River Jordan, the place that speaks of death. The repentant Jews, who composed the faithful remnant in Israel, thus confessed their sins, and acknowledged that they deserved the penalty of death. They put their faith in Israel’s coming King!

2. “The Gospel of the Kingdom” and “The Gospel of the Grace of God.”

We can best understand what John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus and the twelve disciples meant by **“the gospel of the kingdom”** as we compare it with **“the gospel of the grace of God”** (Acts 20:24). What did the Jews who listened to John and Christ and His disciples understand them to mean by **“the gospel of the kingdom”**? Without question, they knew that **“the gospel of the kingdom”** referred to the Messiah’s kingdom, the rule of the heavens over the earth. They knew that John and Jesus and the twelve were pointing them to that day when David’s greater Son, the Lord from heaven, would sit upon David’s throne, and rule not only over the house of Jacob, but also over the whole earth.

This kingdom, or rule of the heavens over the earth, is described throughout the Old Testament. It forms the burden of the message of all the prophets; and the Jews knew their Old Testament.

“The gospel of the grace of God,” of which Paul spoke to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:24, began with Calvary’s Cross, and will continue to be preached throughout this church age.

Israel had rejected her King; after that rejection, not once did our Lord tell His disciples to continue to preach **“the gospel of the kingdom.”** He told them rather, to **“tarry in Jerusalem”** for the promise of the Father, even the Holy Spirit, in whose power they should go forth into **“all the world,”** preaching the Gospel of His cross.

This is our message today; and it will be our message until Jesus comes to take the church home to be with Himself.

After the rapture of the church, the 144,000 Jews of **“the great tribulation”** period will once more take up the message which John the Baptist preached; for they, too, will herald **“the gospel of the kingdom”** (Matthew 24:14; Revelation 7:1-17; 14:1-5). The King will then be verily **“at hand,”** at the very door! For He Himself will suddenly appear to end that **“time of Jacob’s trouble.”** Then the day, of which Isaiah prophesied, and of which John spoke, will literally be fulfilled.

“The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it” (Isaiah 40:5).

“The gospel of the kingdom” heralds a coming King who will rule over a literal kingdom upon this earth. It offers to men citizenship in that kingdom, upon the basis of repentance of sin and faith toward God. **“The gospel of the grace of God”** offers to men citizenship in that heavenly inheritance. It makes the repentant sinner a member of the body of Christ, which is His church. It makes the sinner saved by grace an heir of God, and a joint-heir with Christ.

In other words, **“the gospel of the kingdom”** has to do with the earth, and offers citizenship in the millennial kingdom; whereas **“the gospel of the grace of God”** has to do with heaven and the church.

Therefore, it is in keeping with the Jewish character of the book of Matthew that it should be the only one of the four Gospels to mention the preaching of John and Jesus and the twelve concerning these significant words:

“Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

“Go . . . to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

John the Baptist, like all the faithful remnant in Israel, was looking for the Lord Jesus to establish His earthly kingdom at once; and John died a martyr’s death, not living long enough to see the beginning of the church in the world. John was thinking of the righteous judgment of God upon the wicked and the unbelieving at the time when the King will purge the world with His purifying judgments when he warned the hypocritical Pharisees and Sadducees to **“flee from the wrath to come.”** Among other things, John said that the righteous King would baptize **“with the Holy Ghost and with fire”** (Matthew 3:11). Now, it is very significant that when the risen Lord told His disciples to tarry in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit, He said nothing about their being baptized **“with fire.”**

He did say,

“John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence” (Acts 1:5).

Our Lord omitted the baptism **“with fire”** here because He knew that, before the fires of judgment should sweep over this world in purifying power, this whole church age had to intervene; and the baptism with the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost was the empowering experience to which He referred. The baptism **“with fire,”** of which John spoke, will yet come to pass, just prior to the time when Israel’s righteous King will sit upon the throne of His father David. He it is

“. . . whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matthew 3:12).

3. The Anointing of the King by the Holy Spirit at His Baptism by John, Matthew 3:13-17.

Matthew is the only one of the four Gospel writers who tells us of John’s hesitancy in baptizing Jesus. Could it be another glimpse of the majesty and royal dignity of Israel’s King? But a more searching question, and one more often asked, is this: Why should the Lord Jesus, who had no sin, ask John to baptize Him, when baptism, to the sinner, indicates confession and repentance of sin?

The Bible does not answer the question directly. One thing it does tell us, beyond controversy; and that is the absolute sinlessness, the unswerving holiness of the Lord Jesus Christ. The footnote of the Scofield Reference Bible offers two suggestions, which are so clearly stated that we quote them here:

“It may be suggested: (1) That Jesus was now to receive His anointing with the Holy Spirit (v. 16) unto His threefold office of Prophet, Priest, and King. In the Levitical order (**Exodus** 29:4-7) the high priest was first washed, then anointed. While Christ’s priestly work did not begin till He **‘offered himself without spot to God’** (Hebrews 9:14), and His full manifestation as the King-Priest after the order of Melchizedek awaits the kingdom . . . yet He was then anointed, once for all. (2) But John’s baptism was the voice of God to Israel, and the believing remnant responded (v. 5). It was an act of righteousness on the part of Him who had become, as to the flesh, an Israelite, to take His place with this believing remnant.”

Thus the King of Israel identified Himself with His people in that which spoke of death. This seems to be the meaning of His reply to John’s question, when He said, **“Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness”** (Matthew 3:15).

It was a wonderful sight that John saw — the very first visible manifestation of the Holy Trinity at one time to the view of man: The Father’s voice; the Son’s bodily presence; the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove!

John, the evangelist, explains that God had told John the Baptist that he would recognize the Son of God, even Israel's Messiah and King, by the descent of the Spirit upon Him (John 1:33). Then the Father's voice bore testimony to His Son's perfections and fitness for the work He had come into the world to do. It was a testimony to Jesus' deity, a testimony to His sinlessness, a testimony to the Father's love for the Son, **"This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."**

4. Satan's Effort to Rob the King of His Kingdom, Matthew 4:1-11.

The temptation of Jesus by Satan, as well as His anointing by the Holy Spirit, seems to have been a part of His preparation for His public ministry. Of one thing we can be certain: Christ was tempted, not to see whether or not He would sin; but to prove to men, angels, Satan, and demons that He could never, never sin! He also **"suffered being tempted,"** in order to be able to sympathize with us in all our temptations and trials. (See Hebrews 2:18; 4:15). But let us never for one moment lose sight of the fact that Jesus was **"God manifest in the flesh";** and

"God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man" (James 1:13).

Satan knew that Christ always was and ever shall be the rightful King of this earth; but Satan is the usurping **"prince of this world";** and he offered the kingdoms of this earth to the Lord Jesus on his own wicked world-principles — the worship of Satan himself. What audacity!

To each of Satan's three attacks, our Lord answered with Scripture; and thus He set an example for the humblest child of God. Whole sermons could be preached upon these texts, our Lord's use of the written Word. Whole sermons could be preached upon the subtlety of the enemy of our souls, who even dared to tempt the Lord God, Israel's King, and our Saviour! But the heart of the message, we believe, is this: That our Lord Jesus and Israel's Messiah could not sin because He was our holy God. He met and resisted the devil for us; and, by His grace, we can let Him fight this enemy for us by His own Holy Spirit. Yes; Israel's King proved His absolute righteousness by meeting and overcoming the devil! He alone has the authority and the power and the right to sit upon David's throne!

5. The King "Teaching . . . Preaching . . . and Healing"

Matthew 4:12-25

The story of John's imprisonment by the wicked Herod is told in the opening verses of chapter fourteen. But in chapter four we read:

"Now when Jesus had heard that John was cast into prison, he departed into Galilee; and leaving Nazareth, he came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is upon the sea coast, in the borders of Zabulon and Nephthalim: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, The land of Zabulon, and the land of Nephthalim, by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles; the people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up" (Matthew 4:12-16).

A godly Jew, guided by the Holy Spirit, reading this quotation from the Old Testament, would turn to Isaiah 9:1, 2; there he would see that the prophet was writing about the promised Messiah; and seeing, he would believe that Jesus of Nazareth had come to fulfill the prophecy! He would be convinced that Jesus was the King of Israel!

It was “**from that time**”; evidently from the time of the imprisonment of John, that Christ began to preach repentance that “**the kingdom of heaven**” was “**at hand.**”

As He walked by the Sea of Galilee, He called four of His twelve disciples to follow Him: Peter and Andrew, James and John. It is beautiful to note that “**straightway**,” “**immediately**,” they left their fishing nets, and followed Jesus. James and John also left their father — all for Jesus, their Messiah and Lord. It is a lesson we need to keep ever before us, that of giving Christ the first place in our lives, that He may teach us to become “**fishers of men.**”

The last three verses of chapter four tell us something of the ceaseless activity of the Lord as He went about “**all Galilee, teaching . . . preaching . . . and healing.**”

- What was He teaching? That He had come to be Israel’s King.
- What was He preaching? “**The gospel of the kingdom.**”
- What did He heal? “**all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people**”

All of this bore witness to His right to be the King of the Jews. These miracles and His profound teachings were the credentials which proved His right to David’s throne.

Of course, they are that — and more! They are the evidence that He loves lost and suffering humanity; that He came to heal the broken-hearted and to bind up the wounded. They open up to our view glimpses of the compassion and sympathy and love of the heart of the eternal God. All Israel should have known, by these things, that their King was in their midst, that “**the kingdom of heaven**” was verily “**at hand.**”

~ end of chapter 3 ~

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