

Chapter 8

Baptism, Temptations, and Mortal Ministry

"And Jesus returned from the wilderness in the power of the Spirit into Galilee: and there went out a fame of him through all the region round about."

— Luke 4:14

Voice Crying in the Wilderness

There is a man you need to meet before we go any further. A cousin to Jesus, John the Baptist. He was the son of a priest named Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth, who had prayed in their old age for a child until hope itself seemed fleeting. The blessing of conception was granted, but was only the beginning. While still within the womb of Elizabeth, John recognized the presence of the Messiah within the womb of Mary, and the babe leaped for joy.

As an adult, John was not what you would expect. He wore clothing made of camel's hair, ate locusts and wild honey, and carried in his chest a burning knowledge that he had to share with anyone and everyone around him. Rather than teaching in the Temple or in synagogues, or even in the streets of cities, John lived and preached in the wilderness—not as a hermit hiding from the world—as a prophet God to whom was given a specific mission: prepare the way of the Lord!

The people of Judea went out to him in the desert margins by the hundreds — farmers, tax collectors, soldiers, Pharisees in their long robes. Something in his voice drew them forth.

His message was not complicated: "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matthew 3:2) It was the message the prophets had always carried, compressed now to a single sentence, urgent in the way a man is urgent when he knows the hour has nearly come.

Matthew paused to tell his readers who this was: "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." (Matthew 3:3) Seven hundred years before John's birth, Isaiah had seen

him. He had written him down. And here he was — exactly where the prophecy said he would be, calling Israel to the river, calling them to the threshold they had been approaching for four thousand years.

I think about what it must have meant to stand in that crowd. To live under Roman occupation, to carry the long memory of a people who had been promised something they had nearly stopped believing would come — and to hear this man speak with that kind of certainty. Not the certainty of argument. The certainty of someone who had already seen what was coming and could not find words sufficient to prepare you for it.

John himself said: "He that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear." (Matthew 3:11)

He was pointing. That was all he was doing. He was pointing, and burning, and preparing the ground.

Entering the River

Around the age of thirty, Jesus left Galilee and walked south to the Jordan.

He was not coming to John as a seeker comes to a teacher. He was coming to fulfill a commandment of His Father — not for His own sake but for ours. He had no sin requiring forgiveness, no old life needing to be washed away. He came because God had asked Him to, and because everything required of His children was required of Him also. He would not stand apart from us even at the water's edge.

When John saw Him coming, something happened in that righteous man. He had been baptizing crowds all morning. Then he looked up — and he knew. The Spirit bore witness to him before a single word was spoken. He said, "I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?" (Matthew 3:14)

Jesus answered simply: "Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness." (Matthew 3:15)

There is a whole theology in that exchange, and I am not going to unfold it here. What I want you to see is the posture. The Son of God — the Creator of heaven and earth, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in mortal flesh — standing in a river in first-century Judea, submitting to the hands of a mortal man, because His Father asked Him to. In His economy, humility is never weakness. It is always the doorway to something larger.

John baptized Him.

"And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: and lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:16-17)

The Father spoke. I do not know what that sounded like — whether the crowd heard words or only felt something shift in the air, whether the sound was the kind that enters through the ears or the kind that enters through the chest. What I know is that something was declared that day over the water, in front of witnesses, for the record: This is my Son. I am pleased with Him.

Thousands of years of waiting. Forty years of wandering in Egypt's shadow. Seventy years in Babylon. Centuries of silence after Malachi. And then a voice — not from a burning bush, not through a prophet's trembling mouth — but from the Father Himself, speaking directly into the world He had made, claiming the Son He had sent.

He came. As promised, He came.

Strength in the Desert

He did not go to Jerusalem. He did not begin to preach. The Spirit led Him immediately into the wilderness — and Satan was waiting.

Forty days. Fasting. Alone.

The three temptations that followed were not random assaults. They were a precise examination — each one aimed at the same nerve, each one asking the same question under a different disguise: Are you actually who you think you are? And if you are, why are you doing it this way?

The first came when His hunger had reached its sharpest edge. Satan pointed to the stones and said, in effect: You have the power. Use it. Feed yourself. Jesus answered with scripture: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." (Matthew 4:4) He did not debate. He did not negotiate. He reached for the word of God the way a man reaches for it who knows what he believes — not as a weapon, but as a fact that will not move.

The second came at the pinnacle of the temple. Satan, remarkably, also reached for scripture: Surely the angels will catch you. Jump. Show everyone what you are. Jesus answered: "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God." (Matthew 4:7) There is something worth sitting with here. Satan

knows the text. He can quote it. This was never a test of biblical knowledge. It was a test of whether Jesus would make His identity into a spectacle — whether He would perform Messiahship for an audience rather than fulfill it through sacrifice. He would not.

The third came on a high mountain, where Jesus was shown all the kingdoms of the earth in a single vision. Bow down to me, Satan said, and I will give you all of it. This was the most unguarded offer of all — a way to win without the cross. The kingdoms were real. The shortcut was real. Jesus could have had everything He came to establish — dominion over every nation — without Gethsemane, without Golgotha, without any of what was coming. All He had to do was bow. His firm answer was, "Get thee hence, Satan." (Matthew 4:10)

This was not a temptation because power is evil. Not because the nations were not worth having. But because He had not come for dominion. He had come for redemption — and redemption requires sacrifice, not a spectacle; a cross, not a shortcut.

I have often thought about these temptations in my own life. Each one is aimed at something real — the body's need, the soul's longing to be seen and valued, the impatient desire for the outcome without the cost. He refused them all, not with arguments but with a settled certainty about who He was and why He had come.

Luke added a detail that should be recognized: the devil "departed from him for a season." (Luke 4:13) Not forever. He would return — at Gethsemane, at the cross, everywhere in between, pressing at the same identity again and again. But the wilderness settled something that would not be moved. Jesus knew who He was and what He had come to do. He had been tested at the point of His deepest hunger, His deepest longing for an easier way — and He had not flinched. Angels came and ministered to Him after.

The Ministry

He returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit. Word of Him began to spread before His arrival anywhere.

That phrase in Luke deserves a moment: in the power of the Spirit. This was not a man who had survived an ordeal and needed time to recover. This was a man who had come through fire clarified — who knew exactly what He was carrying, and it showed everywhere He went. "There went out a fame

of him through all the region round about." (Luke 4:14) He taught in the synagogues. He was glorified of all.

His message was the same John had carried, now spoken by the One John had been pointing toward: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel." (Mark 1:15)

He walked the shores of Galilee and found fishermen — not scholars, not priests, not the people anyone would have assembled for a movement of this magnitude. Simon and Andrew casting nets. James and John mending theirs in a boat with their father. He said, "Follow me" — and they came up out of the water and left everything behind them on the shore. They did not know precisely what they were following. But something in the way He said it made remaining impossible.

What the ministry felt like from the outside was a stormfront — the kind that moves across a whole region and changes the quality of the air. Crowds gathered wherever He went, pressing in from every direction. People who had been carrying their conditions in silence for years — the sick, the frightened, the ones the religious establishment had quietly written off — kept finding themselves in front of Him. And He kept stopping. He kept seeing the person the crowd had turned into an obstacle. He reached toward what the law said was untouchable. He asked the names of people everyone else stepped around.

Something was happening that was larger than any individual healing. The world was getting a prolonged look at what God is actually like — not God explained or argued for, but God moving through Galilean villages at the pace of a man who has time to stop.

This Scripture Is Fulfilled

He went home to Nazareth.

He had been away — months now, perhaps longer. Word had reached them: healings in Capernaum, crowds following Him everywhere, things happening that defied explanation. The people in that synagogue knew Him. They had known His father. They had watched Him grow up on those streets, learn that trade, walk to this building every Sabbath since He was old enough to walk at all.

He stood up to read, as was the custom. The attendant handed Him the scroll of Isaiah. He unrolled it to a place that seemed to find itself under His hand, and He read:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord." (Luke 4:18-19; Isaiah 61:1-2)

He rolled up the scroll. He handed it back to the attendant. He sat down.

"And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him." (Luke 4:20)

That is Luke's way of telling us the room had gone absolutely still. No one was clearing his throat. No one was shifting in his seat. Every person in that synagogue knew what passage had just been read. They had heard it their whole lives — the great servant poem of Isaiah, the anointed one who would come, the year of the Lord's favor, the liberation of the captive and the broken. It was among the most beloved texts in Jewish worship. And the man who had just read it was sitting in the teacher's seat, looking at them.

Then He said: "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:21)

Not: this scripture describes what I am trying to do. Not: I hope to embody something of this spirit. Not a metaphor, not an aspiration, not a program.

This day. This scripture. Fulfilled. In your hearing.

The room where He had grown up. The people who had seen Him every Sabbath from the time He was old enough to walk through that door. The town that knew the smell of His father's workshop. And He was telling them — through them, telling everyone — that the ancient promise had a face, and they were looking at it.

I want you to imagine standing in that room. In that silence. The question in the minds of everyone in that congregation is the same one that has been building through everything we have read together—the long human search across the centuries, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, the whole arc of preparation that has brought us to this moment.

Who is this man?

In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.