

## Matthew Bible Study

### Chapters 2–3 | Study Handout

#### *The World Jesus Was Born Into*

#### WHO IS JOHN THE BAPTIST?

John the Baptist is one of the most extraordinary figures in all of Scripture. Here is what the Bible tells us about him:

- **His birth** was miraculous — born to Elizabeth, a barren woman, and Zechariah, a priest (Luke 1)
- **His calling** was announced by an angel before he was born
- He took a **Nazirite vow** from birth — no wine, no razor, set apart for God's purposes (like Samson and Samuel before him)
- He dressed in **camel hair with a leather belt** — intentionally echoing the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:8)
- He lived in **the wilderness of Judea**, eating locusts and wild honey
- He baptized in the region of the Jordan River — the location identified by the early church father Origen (185–254 AD) as **Bethabara**, meaning *"House of the Ford"* (Judges 7:24), still preserved in the KJV and NKJV
- He fulfilled the prophecy of **Isaiah 40:3** — *"A voice crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord"*
- He also fulfilled **Malachi 4:5** — the promised Elijah who would come before the great Day of the Lord
- He confronted **Herod** directly about his unlawful marriage — and was ultimately beheaded for it
- His entire identity was captured in one statement: *"I am a voice. He is the Word."*

#### THE ESSENES

##### Who were they?

A Jewish sect that emerged approximately 150 years before Jesus, living in a monastic community in the **Judean wilderness near the Dead Sea** at a place called **Qumran**.

##### What did they believe?

- They saw themselves as the true, pure remnant of Israel
- They practiced **frequent baptism** for repentance and ritual cleansing — beyond what traditional Jewish law required
- They lived **monastic, celibate lives**, completely separated from mainstream society
- They were devoted students and copiers of scripture
- They believed the **Messiah would come from among their own community**
- They disappeared around **70 AD** when Rome destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple

**The Dead Sea Scrolls connection:**

Most scholars believe the **Dead Sea Scrolls** — discovered in caves at Qumran in 1947 — were painstakingly hand-copied by the Essenes. These scrolls are among the most significant archaeological finds in history, confirming the accuracy of the Hebrew scriptures across centuries.

**JOHN THE BAPTIST & THE ESSENES — HOW DO THEY COMPARE?**

	<b>John the Baptist</b>	<b>The Essenes</b>
<b>Where</b>	Wilderness of Judea	Wilderness of Judea (Qumran)
<b>Baptism</b>	Baptized for repentance	Frequent ritual baptism
<b>Lifestyle</b>	Ascetic, set apart	Monastic, celibate, set apart
<b>Scripture</b>	Proclaimed and fulfilled it	Studied and copied it
<b>The Messiah</b>	Preached <i>Jesus</i> as Messiah	Believed Messiah would be one of <i>them</i>
<b>Engagement with society</b>	Went into Jerusalem; confronted Herod directly	Completely withdrew from society

**Key takeaway:** John may have been raised among or heavily influenced by the Essenes — but at some point he broke away. His commission was not to hide in the desert with the righteous. It was to go out and *announce the King*.

## THE PHARISEES

### Where did they come from?

The Pharisees were not ordained by God or the Law of Moses. They were a man-made sect that emerged during the **400 years of silence** between the Old and New Testaments, during the time of the Maccabees.

### What did they believe?

- The name *Pharisee* comes from a Hebrew word meaning "**separated**" — separation was their mark of holiness
- They accepted the written Word of God as inspired Scripture
- They also gave **equal authority to oral tradition**, claiming it traced back to Moses
- That oral tradition eventually became **613 laws added on top of the Law of Moses**
- Adding to God's Word is explicitly forbidden — *Deuteronomy 4:2*
- They believed in the **resurrection of the dead**

### Their two schools of thought:

	School of Shammai	School of Hillel
<b>Approach</b>	Very strict	More flexible/loose
<b>Focus</b>	Rigid adherence to law and tradition	Broader interpretation

### Their political power:

The Pharisees were the **minority** in the Sanhedrin but held the **greatest influence** because they had the loyalty of the common people. That popular support made them the most powerful faction in the room.

**Important:** Not all Pharisees opposed Jesus.

- **Nicodemus** was a Pharisee (John 3)
- The **Apostle Paul** was a Pharisee (Philippians 3:5)

## THE SADDUCEES

### Who were they?

An aristocratic, wealthy, politically connected class tied to the **Temple in Jerusalem**. They

held the majority of the 70 seats on the ruling council — the **Sanhedrin** — and included the chief priests and the high priest.

### What did they believe?

- They did **not** believe in the resurrection of the dead
- They were more politically aligned with **Rome** than other Jewish groups
- They walked the line between Roman interests and Jewish ones — likely to protect their wealth and power
- They were **not relateable** to common people and did not have popular support
- They were not known for personal piety or loyalty to the purity of the faith

### Their relationship with the Pharisees:

These two groups despised each other — until Jesus arrived. Then the principle applied:

*"The enemy of my enemy is my friend."*

### THE SANHEDRIN

The supreme Jewish ruling council, made up of **70–72 rabbis**. They handled Jewish legal and religious matters internally — the goal was to keep disputes within their own system and out of Roman courts. Both the Pharisees (minority) and Sadducees (majority) held seats on the Sanhedrin.

📌 **Homework:** Look up the Sanhedrin on **GotQuestions.org** and come back next week with one thing that surprised you.

### KEY SCRIPTURE REFERENCES — CHAPTER 3

John's Term	Old Testament Reference
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Winnowing fork	Jeremiah 15:7
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Threshing floor	Hosea 9:2
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Chaff	Hosea 13:3; Zephaniah 2:2
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### Why does this matter?

When John used these terms, every Jewish listener knew exactly what he was invoking —

the OT judgment of God on an unfaithful people. It was like someone today saying *"I have a dream"* — the reference is immediate, loaded, and unmistakable.

### **MATTHEW 3:7-10 — THE CONFRONTATION**

*(Not found in Mark's Gospel)*

*"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."*

— **Matthew 3:7-10**

#### **Why does Matthew include this and Mark does not?**





Matthew was writing to a **Jewish audience** who knew exactly who the Pharisees and Sadducees were, what they stood for, and why being confronted by John carried enormous weight. Mark's audience was Gentile — this level of detail wasn't necessary for his readers the way it was for Matthew's.

### **PERSONAL REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

Take time this week to sit with these honestly:

1. **The Pharisee Question:** Is there any area of your spiritual life where you've added your own "fence rules" on top of what God actually requires — and started calling that holiness?
2. **The Sadducee Question:** Is there a place where you've quietly compromised your convictions to protect your comfort, your finances, or your reputation?
3. **The Essene Question:** Have you retreated into a Christian bubble to stay "pure" — and in doing so, stopped engaging the world you're called to reach?
4. **The John Question:** What would it cost you to point to Jesus clearly and publicly in your own circles right now?
5. **The Baptism Question:** God said *"I am well pleased"* over Jesus before He had performed a single miracle. Do you find it hard to receive God's love and approval before you've "earned" it? Where does that come from?

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

-  **GotQuestions.org** — Search: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Sanhedrin, John the Baptist
-  **BibleHub.com** — Ellicott's Commentary on Matthew 2:23 (for the "Nazarene" reference)
-  **Bible Maps** — Search Google or check the back of your Bible for maps of the Jordan River region and the location of Qumran
-  **Bible Dictionaries** — Cultural and historical context for any term you want to go deeper on

## COMING UP NEXT

### Matthew Chapter 4 — The Temptation of Jesus

The same wilderness. 40 days. The same enemy Israel faced in the desert.

And a victory that changes everything.