

PREPARED

Luke 3:7-18

The condition of the world about two thousand years ago was such that there was a lot of “bad news” around. We sometimes think we have it bad today, but things were really difficult in the “not-so-good old days.” The concept of the rights of individuals, the hope that modern medicine gives to people, the well-developed food producing methods we now have, a good transportation system – all of these were missing. Some people were in slavery, others were dominated by occupying foreign armies and life itself seemed to be cheap. Into all this bad news came a call for people to turn their lives around and make things ready for a Savior who would soon be coming on the scene. The Hebrew people had been looking forward to the coming of the One they called the Messiah. This person had been mentioned in the blessing that Israel gave to his sons, He had been mentioned in the saga of Job (I know that my Redeemer lives and will one day stand upon the earth), He was spoken of by the Psalmists, by Isaiah, and Daniel even predicted the time when He would come onto the stage of the world. Those who were living during that time and were familiar with the writings of the prophets were expectantly looking for the bearer of Good News at that time.

Just in case not everyone was looking for and expecting the Messiah, God arranged for there to be an announcement of the event. It is impressive that God had all this planned out (even before the world began), even to the point of arranging a miracle to allow an elderly couple that were thought to be not capable of having children to have a son. God has a purpose in His miracles and some thirty years after the birth of John he was acting, by most people’s standard, as rather weird. But John was **not** some eccentric who was out running around the desert talking to whomever would listen. This man was recognized by those who saw and heard him as someone special. He was special enough and operated in such power that people were questioning whether or not he was the Messiah.

John was sent to prepare people for the message and ministry of the Messiah. He preached repentance and wanted people to give testimony of their repentance by an act that we call baptism or being dipped or submerged in water. John attracted quite a crowd and had many followers. People from the rural and city areas came to hear and to respond to John and his message.

Warning – 3:7-9

⁷ So he began saying to the crowds who were going out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” ⁸ “Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father,’ for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹ “Indeed the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” Luke 3:7–9 (NASB95)

Matthew tells us that John made this statement to the Pharisee and Sadducees that had come out to hear him. They did not come to be taught but to criticize. They didn’t come to learn but to find fault. They were the religious lay leaders of the Jews. They certainly did not come to “hear” him so as to heed his message. They were listening for some evidence that could be used to discredit John’s ministry. They were very knowledgeable regarding the religion of the day, but the condition of their heart was what John was concerned about.

John saw them in the crowd. How could he miss them? They were in their long robes and dressed so much better than the rest of the people. John had very little use for those who were religious for the sake of being religious. He called them a bunch of snakes. I believe John

chose his words carefully. Satan had disguised himself as a serpent when he tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden. In the Revelation, John (the Revelator) referred to the devil as a great serpent. John (the Baptizer) saw people who were just “religious” as being tools of the devil.

They had come to be baptized but John knew there was not real repentance. A life that is marked by real repentance will show evidence of that change. John refused to let them find comfort in the fact that they were Jews. John was quick to put them on notice that true repentance should show some evidence of change. In our churches today, we are not likely to question the sincerity of people who come to “join the church” and we would never even think to ask to see some “fruit” or evidence of their Christian life. Therefore, each of us should be questioning ourselves to see if our Christian walk is producing the “fruit” of faithfulness since it is not likely that anyone else is going to raise the question to us. There should be an evident difference in the life of a Christian and a non-Christian.

There are people today who believe that they are Christians (saved) because they are Americans or because their parents were fine Christians. There are others who think that just because they walked down an aisle and said a few words to a preacher to the effect that they believe in Jesus, that they can then live their lives anyway they choose and that it will be perfectly all right with God. The real evidence that we believe in Jesus is the fact that He lives in us and is our very life.

The reference to the wrath to come was likely related to the coming of the end of the period of probation for the Jews. God had granted them 490 years to finish transgressions, to bring in righteousness, and to anoint the Messiah. John knew they had failed to do the first part and he was sure they would reject the coming Messiah. He knew they were thinking that it was enough to be a true descendant of Abraham (through the lineage of Isaac and Jacob). They knew about God’s promise to Abraham and they thought they had it made with God simply because they could trace their physical lineage back to him. What they failed to understand was that God is Spirit and the promises were given to spiritual Israel, to those who have the faith of Abraham.

Today, we can find ourselves with similar “misplaced faith.” We may be counting on having our name on the role of a church and we believe that Jesus is the Son of God. However, if there has been no real change in our lives, then we are being deluded just the Jews were by believing they were right with God because they were physical descendants of Abraham. John’s not so subtle message was, “Think again!”

A good example of “subtleties” being lost in the translation is seen in words of John regarding God’s ability to “raise up” (literally wake up) sons from stones is seen in verse eight. What John said (in Aramaic or Hebrew) is a play on words for stones and sons. (Aramaic and Hebrew are close – for example the word for son in Hebrew is “ben” and is “bar” in Aramaic.) The Hebrew word for stones is “eben” and is apparently the same in Aramaic. John was saying that God could make “ben” (sons) from the “eben” (stones). The subtlety goes even further than just the similar pronunciation sounds of the two words. The Hebrew word “eben” (stone) is made up of three letters (reading from right to left) Aleph, Bet, and Nun. These three letters in the Hebrew alphabet represent God as Father (Aleph), Son (Bet), and Holy Spirit (Nun).

John also used a picture of a tree being cut down. Paul verbally painted a picture in Romans 11 about branches being broken off (Jews) and other being grafted in (Gentiles). John may have been referring to the preparation for “grafting in” the Gentiles to the root stock of Abraham. The Jews were entrusted with God’s Plan of Salvation and were to use it to help all mankind come to God. They failed to do that (did not bear fruit) and that responsibility would be shifted to others. Based on the historical evidence, we know this trust was transferred to the

Church.

Notice that along with the Good News, there was some Bad News. It was time for a change. In fact, it was a “last chance” for many of these people. John warned them and we too should learn from his message that time can run out and one day it will be too late.

Response – 3:10-14

¹⁰ And the crowds were questioning him, saying, “Then what shall we do?” ¹¹ And he would answer and say to them, “The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise.” ¹² And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” ¹³ And he said to them, “Collect no more than what you have been ordered to.” ¹⁴ Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, “And what about us, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages.” Luke 3:10–14 (NASB95)

Not everyone was like the religious leaders of that day. Many people were hungry for a good word about (and from) God. Those who were sincere wanted to change and to find a better life. Therefore, they asked the question: “What should we do?” There was not anything really complicated about what John told them. Most of them knew what God wanted of them. Most of us know what God wants of us. We just need to do it. Hundreds of years before the Lord had spoken through Habakkuk a generic set of requirements: “He has shown you, O man, what is good. What does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God?”

Many times, we can help someone by sharing what we have and we would not miss what we give away to someone in need. The impact on us may be minimal but the impact on the one who receives the help may be very significant. Sometimes we conclude that we really don’t know anyone who has needs and this can be a problem in the kind of world in which we live. However, there are opportunities to give through agencies that are in daily contact with people who need help. We can support charitable help groups that provide meals or other help for people who are struggling financially. The help we provide doesn’t have to be financial. It could be something as simple as mowing their lawn when they are on vacation or repairing a light switch for a neighbor.

Division – 3:15-18

¹⁵ Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, ¹⁶ John answered and said to them all, “As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” ¹⁷ “His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” ¹⁸ So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people. Luke 3:15–18 (NASB95)

John as an unusual person in his dress and his diet. He wore very rough clothing and ate whatever he could find in the wilderness, but this was not the most unusual thing about John. The most unusual thing was that he was a great leader and yet he did not hold on to that fact, but recognized that someone far greater than he was to arrive on the scene of history. John was aware of the speculation about him as to whether he were the Messiah. In attempting set the record straight, he referenced and contrasted what he was doing to what would be done by the Messiah when He did come.

John did not feel worthy to even untie the shoes of this Greater One. John also recognized that the physical baptism that he was emphasizing had a counter part in the spiritual. John was using water and Jesus would use the Holy Spirit. John was baptizing (or immersing) people in water. The Messiah would immerse people in the Holy Spirit. They would be

surrounded and engulfed by the Spirit of God. John's baptism symbolized washing as a means to purify. The Messiah was pictured as using fire in the purifying process to burn away the dross from the lives of all who would come to Him. John attempted to do some sorting between the sincere and insincere who came to him for baptism. The Messiah would use the "breeze" or wind of the Holy Spirit to bring conviction and to draw men to Jesus. Even after people would come to Jesus, the work of the Holy Spirit would still go on in that a separating process would be carried out to separate us from the perishable part of our lives and to leave only that which is useful to God.

Some commentators believe that separating the wheat from the chaff could have a dual application: the first would be to the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers and the second to the separation of the saved from the unsaved.

Consider that chaff is a natural part of the wheat, but it must be removed before it can be used. In the same way, our lives that are presented to God have to have the chaff removed so that we may be of used to God. This is what is involved in sanctification. It is the work of the Holy Spirit. The Greek word for wind (such as might be produced by the fan) is the same as that used for spirit.

Another possibility is that winnowing was a reference to sorting out true believers from pretenders. Some think this might be a reference to the tribulation that was to come. The burning up of the residue could be a reference to the outcome of the judgement at the end time.

The Way of the Lord (Jesus Christ) is also the way to the Lord. God, in His grace and providence has made that Way available to all who will "turn and look" to God and trust in His provision of salvation by what Christ did for us (died for our sins) on the Cross.