

A Declaration of Those Things Which Are Most Surely Believed Among Us

An Expository Study of **The Gospel According to Luke** **Chapter 3- Luke 3:6-9**

33- The Word of God; The Baptism of Repentance; and the Brood of Vipers

June 14, 2009

Luke 3:6-9

There are many people who in their smug self-righteousness want to dismiss the Truth claims of Scripture by saying that even though the *historical* facts of the Bible are unreliable- that what the Bible actually does best is to teach *moral* truth- or that it gives what they call "life messages" or "life lessons", sort of like Aesop's Fables.

These people like to quote from the Bible when the quotation fits in with their convoluted morality- but they seldom, if ever, actually read or study the Bible in context.

But what they fail to mention is that after thousands of years of examination- mostly by people who do not believe the Bible and are hostile to it- the historical statements in the Bible have all been proven to be true. Not one person, place, or event that is mentioned in the Word of God has ever been proven to be false- not one. And that is very remarkable.

In fact- according to *Archeological Review Magazine*- since the publication of the King James Version Bible in 1611- there have been over 1 million archeological discoveries made in the Middle East. And of those 1 million discoveries- not one shred of doubt has been cast on any statement- historical, moral, or scientific- that the Bible makes.

Now let me put that statement in context for you. No other ancient book that we possess can make that claim- not one. All of the other ancient manuscripts of which we are in possession have been proven to be false, or unreliable, or that they were embellished with exaggerations. But not the Bible.

And to make matters worse for those who disbelieve God's Word- the people and events that are described in the Bible that were doubted

for many centuries- due to lack of information- have all been proven to be and occur exactly the way that the Bible says that they happened- since all these discoveries have been made.

And yet the attacks against the Word of God continue. And in the last decade- due to the acceptance in American society of a new breed of bold and radical atheists- it is sort of "cool" for people to say that the factual data about events that actually happened are unimportant; what matters about the Bible is the *moral* truth that it teaches, the insight into human nature, and the reflected ideals. And what blows my mind is the number of uninformed and silly Church members who nod their head and agree with that.

Listen, dear friends, if I cannot trust the information that is in the Bible about which I *can* verify through science and archeology and physics- why in the world would I trust anything that this Book says about things that I *cannot* verify like Heaven and Hell and Salvation? If the *temporary* statements in Scripture are suspect- why would I ever take comfort in the statements made in the Bible about *eternal* matters? In other words- why would I ever use the Bible for *moral* information and eternal guidance if the Bible is lying to me or deceiving me about natural and temporal information?

These kinds of things bothered me as a child and so I went to great lengths to find out if they were true. You see, if I am going to base my eternal soul on the claims made in Scripture- then I want to find out if the Scriptures are worthy of my trust. And I am happy to tell you this morning that the 66 Books of the Holy Bible are fully reliable and fully trustworthy because they are inspired. And by default that makes the Words in this Book the most unique Words in all the earth.

The Words of Scriptures are special; they are different from any other collection of words on the face of the earth. This one single Book that you hold in your hands is actually a collection of 66 smaller Books - written over a 1500 year time frame by 40 men who were all sinful and frail, who lived on 4 different continents. But what makes these Words so special is that these Words- the Words found in Scripture- were given to these 40 men by God Himself through a mysterious process or a method known as Inspiration.

As they wrote these Words in their own language, with their own terminology, using their own limited information about life and death and God and eternal matters- God the Holy Spirit moved upon these

men like the wind moves a sail boat through the water, and what they wrote was the inspired, infallible, inerrant, authoritative, relevant, and eternal Word of the living God. That process of Inspiration never occurred to anyone else- but the writers of Scripture and that process stopped with the completion of the Canon of Scripture and the death of the Apostle John sometime around 96-98 AD.

And because that is true- this Book demands our attention and it deserves our allegiance and it is worthy that we examine what it says and that we pay close attention to its Truth and that we live our lives in humble submission to its Divine Authority.

And that wondrous process of Inspiration occurs right here in this passage that we read today in **Luke**. God the Holy Ghost moved upon Luke to write these particular Words that are unable to be in error, and you can't read **Luke 3:1&2** and miss the point that Luke is making here- namely, that the people of this record were as real as your next-door neighbor, and the time and place of these events are not his imagination- he didn't make them up- but they are forever recorded in the flow of world history.

John the Baptist's ministry has as much reality in time and space as the rulers that you read about in the history books or people who are alive right now. These people and these events that occurred 2,000 years ago are just as solid and real and true as what you see with your own eyes on the Evening News.

For example- if the Lord should tarry and they uncover the ruins of Gulfport one day- they will see that a four-eyed, flat-footed poe-dunk preacher named Blair Bradley came to shepherd the sheep of The Covenant of Peace Church in the summer of 2000 when Bill Clinton was the President of the United States, and Trent Lott and Thad Cochran were the Senators, and Ronnie Musgrove was the Governor of the State of Mississippi, and Ken Combs was the mayor of Gulfport, and Larry Benefield was the Supervisor of Harrison County. They will be able to pin point exactly when I stood in this pulpit and preached.

And for most of you- that would locate my coming to this Church squarely in real and remembered and verifiable history. And that's what Luke is doing for Theophilus and for us in this passage.

So the time and the place of the beginning of John's ministry is fixed for us by Luke right here in relation to known historical people, places, and events that we can verify with historical records. For

example- the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar's reign was around AD 27 or 28, and the place of John's emergence was out of the wilderness into all the region around the Jordan River.

Now what makes this time frame significant is that since they changed the calendar, and since we can verify that Jesus was born sometime between 4 and 6 B.C., and since the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar's reign would have been around 27 or 28 AD- that would make Jesus *about* 30 years old when He began His Ministry- which is just exactly what Luke tells us in **Luke 3:23**- once again proving the trustworthiness of Scripture.

And what makes this event significant is what we see in the last part of verse 2, "**The word of God came to John.**" And like all the Prophets of the Old Testament- John's Authority and Power came not from himself or from his own personal righteousness or his own personal experiences. No, what gave John credibility, what made people sit up and take notice of John, and what made them listen to what he said is that John spoke on God's behalf. John spoke the Word of God. John didn't preach his opinions, he didn't preach about his politics or his social concerns, John didn't preach about how everybody could become wealthy or happy or hit more home runs or get a better job and derive a nicer chariot. No, John proclaimed a very bland and simple and yet profound message- *"Repent! For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!"*

In **Luke 1:15**- the good doctor says that John was filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb. Now that doesn't mean that John spoke in tongues before he was born because babies cannot speak anything before they are born. No, to be filled with the Spirit is simply to be *controlled* by the Spirit, to be *motivated* by the Spirit, to be *dominated* by the Holy Spirit rather than to be controlled or motivated or dominated by sinful human influences like pride, greed, lust, envy, jealousy, strife, or vengeance.

So John was led by God from his mother's womb and his life was unique because God had graced him to be the forerunner of the Messiah. And so now John comes out of the wilderness to preach with a Word from God and in the Power of God's Spirit. And that means that even though we live 2,000 years later- we had better listen to John's message because it is still *God's* message, and there is nothing we need more than a clear Word from God for our souls.

Luke 3:3

And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins;

Now here- Luke introduces John's ministry with a very concise sentence: "He came into all the district around Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins". Now this certainly does *not* mean that baptism brings forgiveness of sins. Baptism *cannot* wash your sins away- any more than drinking the cup at Communion removes sin from your life- these things do not have that ability. On the contrary- John's baptism *followed* each person's repentance- it came after they had already repented and was a public affirmation that they had truly turned away from sin.

John called the people to repent (turn away from their sins), and the subsequent acceptance of his baptism by these people was a public indication that these individuals had already believed what John was teaching, secondly, it shows that they had agreed with God that they were guilty of sinning, and, third- that it shows that they had turned away from their sins.

Now for some reason- there has been an historical confusion about baptism. And I have no idea why there is a confusion about baptism because the entire purpose of baptism is not to save anybody- but baptism is the public affirmation that the individual has already repented and has already been born again by the Spirit of God and already washed in the Blood. In other words- baptism is the public sign that the individual has already been saved. Therefore- Baptism is for believers, and you cannot believe and you cannot trust in Christ before you are old enough and mature enough to hear and believe the Gospel.

Now it is true that some children who are raised in a Christian home and who are taught the Word of God are mature enough to be baptized, and we want to be careful that we don't forbid these little ones an opportunity to come to Jesus- so we have to take this on a case by case basis- but even then- they must be saved before they are baptized.

But we can be certain, dear friends, that no infant can believe and no infant can reason, and so baptism must be done in public with believers who are old enough to understand.

Another aspect of baptism that should be mentioned is that all Christian baptisms should be by immersion. Sprinkling is not baptism in a Biblical sense, and all who have been sprinkled at one time in their lives should take the next step and be baptized. Even the very word "baptism" itself comes from the Greek- *baptismo*- which means: *submersion or immersion*.

Now the greatest example of baptism is that of Jesus. And in **Matthew 3:16&17**- the Bible says:

16 After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove *and* lighting on Him,

17 and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased."

The Greek phrase that was translated into English in verse 16 to read: "**went up straightway out of the water**" means: *that Jesus came up out of the water after having been immerse down in the water*. So true Christian baptism has four components to it that should be obeyed and followed:

1. All baptism should be carried out publicly and Scripturally. No secret rituals or ceremonies or special oaths like that of the Masons or the Shriner's or the Daughters of the Eastern Star should be allowed in the Christian Church.
2. Baptism should be carried out with people old enough to reason in their minds and hearts just what Salvation is.
3. Baptism is carried out with believers *after* they have confessed their sins and trusted in the finished Work of Jesus Christ for Salvation.
4. Baptism should be done by immersion rather than by sprinkling.

Now, interestingly enough- according to Philip Schaff's History of the Church- during the early days of Christianity- those being baptized were schooled in just what Salvation and Baptism meant, and some type of class was conducted by the Elders so that water baptism would not become a mockery through misuse and neglect, and the Apostle's Creed or the Nicene Creed was read aloud at this service.

So rather than have an "altar call"- as so many Churches have adopted since Charles Finney made it popular in the mid-1800's- the Christian Church for 1900 years allowed for people to make a public profession of faith during the Baptismal service. So this was a big deal.

Even the famous first century Jewish historian, Josephus, in Book 18 of *The Jewish Antiquities*, Chapter 5, Page 2, understood that baptism does not save anyone and that only those who are already saved should be baptized as he said this regarding John and his baptism of repentance:

"Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against Yo-hanan ha-matbil, or John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him (God), if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only], but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified *beforehand* by righteousness."

So the proper view of John's ministry is to see him fully controlled and dominated by the Spirit of God and preaching only God's Word with such effect that multitudes visibly fell under conviction which resulted in many repenting of their sins and then asking for John's baptism.

Now there is also no suggestion here that repentance is a human work that merits the forgiveness of God. There is no hint of the idea that if we repent- God will then look favorably upon us. John the Baptist's ministry is completely in agreement with Paul's teaching in **Ephesians 2** that the Fall of Man was so great, and because the Fall so devastated Mankind- that before we are "quickened" or made alive or given life by a Sovereign act of God alone- we were all "dead" in our trespasses and sins, utterly helpless to bring about our own Salvation, and that we are gloriously saved by the unmerited favor and the unearned special treatment and the underserved love of God, and not by any human works or any act of human will power or human choice. And that as God's born again and Spirit controlled children- we have been "**created in Christ Jesus for good works**".

So John's ministry was entirely due to the Sovereign empowerment of the Holy Spirit as he preached in the Spirit's Power to God's covenant people. The Holy Spirit alone convicted them and the Holy Spirit alone gave them the Faith to believe John's message and repent. As **Philippians 2:13** says- God alone- all by Himself- in all three Persons of His Triunity- worked in these people who heard John- both to will and to do of His God's Good Pleasure. And so Baptism was a public affirmation or a sign of the Spirit-given Grace of repentance.

Now it is very important here for us to see the close connection between repentance and forgiveness- because while it is true that no amount of repentance can ever merit forgiveness in the sight of God- it is also true that without repentance no soul will ever be saved. So we need to spend time with this mystery and ponder it.

Repentance is the telltale mark of the Grace of God at work in our lives. Unless and until sinners repent of their sins- Grace is not at work. There is no such thing as anybody being saved without first being convicted of sin and then repenting of those sins. And nobody can be convicted of sin- unless the Holy Spirit Sovereignly gives them eyes to see and ears to hear and an heart to believe.

But we need to know that we cannot convict anyone. No man can ever in any way bring genuine conviction to the heart of another individual. We can manipulate other people, we can fool people and trick them into doing what we want them to do on a temporary basis and in a limited way, we can coerce them, and we can enforce our own will on them- but no human being born of woman can in any way bring about lasting conviction that will lead to Salvation in another person's heart.

We can't even bring conviction to our *own* hearts. Bringing conviction that leads to Salvation is the sole Work of God the Holy Ghost. And I believe that we best leave that work to Him. We are to live our lives in such a way as to provoke jealousy in others and we are to preach and teach and counsel with Divinely inspired Scripture- but true Conviction, real conviction, life changing conviction, and conviction that will bring forth Salvation is a Sovereign Work of the Holy Spirit alone. And any attempt by anyone to bring conviction to another person is witchcraft and it is evil and it is condemned in the Bible as a horrible sin. Now that doesn't mean that we must tolerate whatever others do. We are commanded in Scripture to cry out against the sins of God's

people, and to encourage and rebuke each other daily so as to maintain Biblical Holiness in the House of God. And we are to draw a line in our homes and in the Church as to what is and what is not acceptable behavior in those who lead based on the Word of God.

But after we do all of that- the Truth of the matter, dear friends, is that God is so Sovereign and so powerful, and unsaved Man is so Fallen and so helpless that unless God brings conviction to the lost person's heart- they will remain unconvicted and they will die in their sins.

We need to know, Christian brothers and sisters, that there is no such thing as Repentance without Conviction, and there is no such thing as true Repentance without Salvation. In other words- those who are truly convicted by God the Holy Ghost and are given the supernatural ability to see their sin and to understand their own lostness and to comprehend the utter sinfulness of sin will also be given- by the same Holy Spirit- the desire to repent, and if they do not repent- it is only because they are not truly convicted.

And it is also true that if a person has been gifted by God to have both the power to be convicted and the desire to repent- they will be saved. And if they are not saved- it is only because God the Holy Ghost has not yet granted them the gift of repentance.

Listen, God would not even waste His time to convict someone unless He fully intended to give that same person the ability and desire to repent. And God would never have allowed a person to repent unless that person was chosen for Salvation. Saving faith and true repentance are always found together. And saved souls are also repentant souls.

And this Truth has an immensely practical implication: if you think you are saved but do not have a repentant spirit- if you never see your own sin, if it is hard for you to repent- you are perhaps not really saved at all. If there are sins of which you refuse to repent, and, in fact, if truth be known, are becoming more and more comfortable with, it is possible that you are not a child of God. (I am not referring to a person who is struggling with sin and often losing, but really desires victory, but rather to the person who has no desire to repent at all.)

Scripture has taught me, beloved, that an ongoing spirit of repentance—repenting not only of *overt* sins *before* Salvation- but also of an *ongoing* willingness and ability to confess quickly and to repent of things like unbelief, negative attitudes, self-centeredness, moral omissions, pride, greed, covetousness, anger - this *ongoing* willingness

and ability to quickly repent is not only a sign of Salvation, but it is a necessity for vibrant spiritual health.

I am always troubled by people who can never confess sin. Prayers about how much people want to do for Jesus and how much they love the Lord without ever confessing sin just smells bad. In my view, it should be much easier for believers to confess sin than it is for lost people because we are already indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and that is the ongoing sanctifying Work that the Holy Ghost does inside believers- He opens our eyes and enlarges our hearts and brings illumination of Divine Truth to our minds so that He may convict us of sin and we may confess it and turn from it and become more like Jesus.

And like I said- the product of true conviction is always confession and repentance. So if a person never confesses and turns from sin- on an ongoing basis- it is because he is not being convicted. If God is not convicting you about things in your life on an ongoing basis- it is because you are either not saved or you are backslid. Rest assured, dear friends, that we all have plenty to be convicted about.

In the Church there are really only two reasons why believers do not confess sin:

1. Pride
2. Gossip

... and both of those are wrong. So please do not allow indwelt pride or the fear of Gossip to keep you from the unimaginable joy of agreeing with God about who you really are.

John preached the "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" with incredible power and thousands responded, and, as Luke notes, the ancient prophecy of **Isaiah 40:3–5** was fulfilled:

3 A voice is calling, "Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.

4 "Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley;

5 Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, And all flesh will see *it* together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Now I have taught about this prophecy at length, but there is much that I have not even mentioned about it. As you know- this prophecy reflects the widespread custom that when an eminent ruler was about to visit a city, the citizens would construct a smooth, broad road so he could enter the city with his pomp and dignity. A modern equivalent is the *Champs Elysees* in Paris, France- which was first used with great effect by Napoleon and his armies. But Isaiah's vision was far grander. This highway that Isaiah saw was not simply a grand entrance to a city, but a great thoroughfare through a mountainous wilderness. In his vision- Isaiah saw mountains flattened and valleys filled in so that a broad superhighway could be made ready for the Messiah-King.

The point we must not miss is this: the great highway John was building was one of *repentance*. The Baptist was saying,

"Mend not your roads, but your lives."⁵

To put it in terms of American geography, repentance removes the obstacles, flattens the Sierras, and fills in the Death Valleys in our lives, so that Christ has full access to our hearts so that the miracle of conviction of sin, the desire and ability to confess that sin and repent, and the glorious Mercy of God in forgiveness may come to that individual.

Repentance invites the fullness of God into the lives of unworthy sinners. In fact, when God's people live repentantly- in the term of the Puritans- with a "healthy sense of self loathing"- it opens the way for the world to know Jesus. In other words- our ability that is given by God to us to be convicted of sin, to confess that sin, and to turn from it and receive God's Forgiveness is not something that only benefits us- but it is, in fact, the single best evangelistic tool that God has ever given to us.

Note again the final line of Isaiah's words in **Isaiah 40:5**:

5 Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, And all flesh will see it (Salvation) together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), p. 27.

If the modern Church today would simply repent of its individual and corporate sins—its materialism and covetousness, its love of money and popularity, its desire to be like the world, its self-centeredness, its lack of faithfulness, its aversion to Scripture, its lovelessness—a highway would be forged to a lost world, and many would repent and come to Christ.

As already mentioned, John's preaching brought a vast response as multitudes came out to the Jordan Valley for baptism. John was surely gratified by this, but he was not entirely pleased. He sensed that some were insincere, and some were even hardened hypocrites. Some had simply come to see the show. Some were religious groupies who just wanted to be part of the scene. Some who were more calculating and had no doubt undergone baptism simply so that their friends would think well of them or perhaps so business connections would be made.

It is no different today, when some people attend evangelical churches, "receive Christ," "repent," and are baptized for similar insufficient reasons. One of the most extreme cases I know of comes from 1986 and the bloodiest shootout in the FBI's history, when two agents were killed and three wounded. Their main assailant was William Matix, a self-proclaimed born-again Christian who regularly attended a Baptist church where he often gave his testimony. Just a month before the shootout he had been profiled as a fine family man in *Christian Home Life*, an evangelical family magazine. All the while, Matix was committing numerous robberies of banks and armored cars.⁶

We must know that repentance, professions of faith, church attendance, and good standing in conservative, Bible-believing fellowships and Reformed Churches do not necessarily prove anything—as John knew in his own situation. So John wisely became very precise in his preaching and he expected to see something called "the fruit of repentance". So should we. No fruit- no repentance.

In **Luke 3:3**- John's preaching is described as a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." And back in Chapter 1 the angel Gabriel had told Zechariah what John's ministry would be, and his words explain what Luke means by repentance in **Luke 1:16&17**.

16 And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God.

⁶ *Chicago Tribune*, Monday, April 14, 1986, Section 1, p. 4.

17 It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Now notice the repetition of the word *turn*: he will *turn* many of the Israelites to the Lord their God. He will *turn* the hearts of the fathers and *turn* the disobedient. This is the meaning of repentance: a turning of the direction of our life and the affections of our heart, so that we become oriented on God and love the things that God loves and hate the things that God hates. John promises the people "forgiveness of sins" in response to their repentance, their turning to God, but he calls them to demonstrate the seriousness of their turning by accepting baptism in the Jordan.

This was a remarkable demand of John on his Jewish kinsmen. In the context in which John lived- baptism had only one main significance among the Jews: it was the symbolic rite that Gentile proselytes had to go through to become Jewish. This made John's baptism very offensive to the average Jew. It implied that unless the Jews were willing to repent- then they were not really genuine Jews and could not count on the promised blessings God had made to Abraham. Or to put it another way, in calling *Jews* to accept a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins- John was telling them in no uncertain terms that they cannot rely on their Jewishness for Salvation; they have to be changed in their heart toward God or they would die in their sins- just like the hated Gentiles.

And Luke's understanding of John's baptism is that it also implied that the way was open for Gentiles to repent and be forgiven because this works both ways. You see, if a person's "Jewishness" does not save him in and of itself- then his "Gentilishness" could not prohibit him from being saved in and of itself.

So the issue that John's ministry brought to the forefront was that Salvation was not a matter of ethnicity or culture or even bloodline but of a broken heart over sin and repentance toward God.

Now the way Luke shows us that John's baptism and preaching had this significance is in the quotation he cites from **Isaiah 40:4–6**. You see, one of the ways to find out what the special point is that Luke

wants to make is to compare his account with Matthew's and Mark's and see what Luke adds or omits.

All three—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—quote **Isaiah 40:3** as a description of John's ministry: "**A voice is calling, Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.**" (cf. **Matthew 3:3, Mark 1:3**). But Luke is the only one who goes on to quote **Isaiah 40:4&5**, which says:

4 "Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley;

5 Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, And all flesh will see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

"It" what? Isaiah says that all flesh shall see "it" together. So who or what is he talking about? When Isaiah said, "all flesh shall see it together" he was saying that all nations- even Gentiles- even idol worshippers, even polygamists, even child sacrificing pagans will see Salvation, they will understand it, God will reveal it to them or bring it to them or make it known to them through Jesus Christ.

So why did Luke go on to quote **Isaiah 40:4&5** when Mathew and Mark did not? I think the reason was to point out that the repentance John was beginning to preach and the Salvation that Jesus will bring is for *all flesh*, not just for Israel. The mountains are lowered, the crooked ways are straightened, the rough ways are smoothed, so that *all flesh, all people*, might see and have access to Salvation.

There is a really interesting confirmation that this is just what Luke is trying to get across here. You see, the Greek word for "Salvation" in **Luke 3:6** is not the more common word that is used all throughout the New Testament- but a very rare word- that occurs only three times in Luke's two volumes set- this Gospel Account and **The Book of the Acts**.

This word is only found in **Luke 2:30; Luke 3:6** and in **The Acts 28:28**. And what is fascinating is that the point in each of these three references is to stress that now Salvation is being made clearly available for Gentiles as well as for repentant Jews. For example, in **Luke 2:30&31** Simeon says of the baby Jesus,

**30 For my eyes have seen Your salvation,
31 Which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples,**

And in **The Acts 28:28** Paul says to the Jews who rejected the Gospel,

Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen.”

So Luke begins and ends his big two-volume work with this emphasis:

The Salvation that Jesus brings is for all men- Jew or Gentile- and any attempt to limit its proclamation or effect to just the Jews is wrong.

So I think Luke confirms for us that John's baptism implies both that Jewishness is no *guarantee* of Salvation, *and* that non-Jewishness is no *hindrance* from Salvation- what matters is that God has Sovereignly granted repentance unto the forgiveness of sins.

Now notice that John hasn't even spoken yet. Everything so far has been Luke's description and interpretation of John's ministry as a whole. But now in **Luke 3:7**- he lets John speak. And what we hear is a confirmation of what we have already heard from Luke.

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?”

With this first sentence, John does four things:

1. He very bluntly tells the whole crowd that they are in a rotten condition. "You are a brood of vipers", he tells them. What does that mean to Jews schooled in the Old Testament? Well, in **Genesis 3** Satan is pictured as a serpent or a viper, and God says to the serpent in **Genesis 3:15**,

And I will put enmity...between your seed and her seed;

So when anybody said you were the seed or the brood of a viper, it was the same as saying that you were a child of the devil. And that's

exactly what Jesus said in **John 8:43f**. All who are born of woman are born as children of the devil. Every single baby on earth is a child of the devil by birth. This is because all men are born in sin and shapen in iniquity because of the Fall of Man in the Garden. We *become* children of God only after we are born again and saved by Grace through Faith in the finished Work of Jesus Christ- but we are born naturally as children of the devil. So John's first word is an indictment of his listeners: you are people in Satan's grip. You are his children with his nature.

2. John warns that there is Divine Wrath on the way. God will bring judgment upon Satan and all his allies. In **Luke 3:17** John pictures the Messiah's coming like this,

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.

Now there is wheat and there is chaff. There are sons of God and sons of the viper, and the children of the one will be gathered into the barn of heaven and the children of the devil will be thrown into the fire of hell. So John warns that there is a coming Wrath which makes the plight of vipers extremely precarious.

3. John also mentions that there is a glorious escape from the Wrath that is sure to come. He told them that they could flee from that Wrath and the right direction to flee is not to dig a hole in the ground and hide, it is not to hide in the security that finances bring, it is not to hide behind a strong military or a guaranteed retirement plan or material possessions because all of those things are passing away.

No, the place to flee is to the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Because when God forgives sins- it is the same thing as removing His Wrath. There is no more eternal condemnation for those who repent and receive forgiveness.

4. Finally John hints, by his question, that the crowd's decision to come to him in search of Salvation was not something they came to on their

own. Someone showed them they needed to repent. I understand John's question to mean something like this:

"Well of all things, the sons of the devil are fleeing the impending wrath. Who could have possibly made it plain to you that you needed to repent?"

John is amazed, I think, that some of these people have really been made aware of their need to flee God's Wrath. Remember that it was no small thing for a Jew to admit he was under the Wrath of God and liable to be burned like chaff in unquenchable fire along with the pagan Gentiles. But here they were offering themselves for John's baptism. And John is amazed. If we could ask John, *"What is the answer to your question: Who did warn them to flee?"*, what would he have said? I think he would have said,

"God warned them."

If Jesus said in **John 6:44**,

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him;

... then surely it would be true earlier that no son of the viper can come to repentance unless God draw him. So, in an indirect way, John's question was giving tribute to the Sovereign Grace of God for impressing on these people their need of Salvation.

Luke 3:8

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.

In this verse- John tries to give these former vipers a new image of what they are. You are no longer poisonous snakes now that you are repenting, you are fruitful trees. There is fruit that comes from genuine repentance. Start bearing that fruit as a witness to others and to your own conscience that you have truly turned to God. He spells out some of what that fruit is in verses 10–14, but first he gives a warning. It's this warning in verse 8 that confirms to us Luke's earlier explanation of

John's baptism, namely, that Jewishness is no guarantee of Salvation, and non-Jewishness is no hindrance from Salvation.

So John says in verse 8,

"Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.'"

In other words- don't let the old serpent sow the deceptive seed in your mind: "Hey! What am I doing here in this river getting baptized like a common Gentile! Who does this guy think he is telling *sons of Abraham* that we are in the same boat with the rest of the world and under God's wrath? Why, haven't we learned from the time we were little the word of God to Abraham in **Genesis 17:7&8**:

7 I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you.

8 I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

How can a son of Abraham, then, ever worry about being swept away like chaff by the wrath of God? John is warning the Jews that such a line of reasoning is a great mistake. A person should never think that any merely human distinctive (like Jewishness or bloodline) can obligate God to bless. The Jews are a great lesson book to all of us who tend to rely on anything for salvation other than the mercy of God.

At the end of **Luke 3:8** John gives the reason why Jews shouldn't rely on their Jewishness:

... for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham.

Now this is a tremendously revealing statement. The first thing it reveals is that John and the Jews *agree* on something. They agree that there must be children of Abraham to inherit the Promises, otherwise God's Word would fail. And they agree that God's Word will never fail and that there will always be children of Abraham to inherit the promises.

But the second thing John's statement reveals is a profound *disagreement* with the Jews if they start to rely on their Jewishness. They disagree about the *freedom and the power of God*. Some of the Jews think that by virtue of their physical Jewishness they've got God in a corner. He *must* bless them. He *can't* pour out wrath on them, because He always keeps His Word. So based on that faulty logic- it did not matter to many of the first century Jews and to many Jews today whether they repented or not. These people are not relying on God's Mercy- but on their own ethnic human distinctive and bloodline. What they fail to see, and what John unmistakably shows them, is that God is not as boxed in as they think he is.

God is well able *both* to keep His Promises to Abraham *and* to put a stop to their boasting in their physical descent from Abraham by sending them to hell. How? He can wipe them out in His Wrath and raise up out of nothing a new people for himself who will bear the fruits of repentance and trust not themselves but in God's free Mercy alone.

What these Jews had forgotten—and it's what all people forget when they try to obligate God by any of their human distinctives or human efforts—they forgot the freedom of God to have mercy on whomever He wills. This is part of how God manifests His Absolute Sovereignty in the earth- by having Mercy on whom He will have Mercy.

Romans 9:9-16

9 For this is the word of promise: "AT THIS TIME I WILL COME, AND SARAH SHALL HAVE A SON."

10 And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived *twins* by one man, our father Isaac;

11 for though *the twins* were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to *His* choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls,

12 it was said to her, "THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER."

13 Just as it is written, "JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED."

14 What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!

15 For He says to Moses, "I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION."

16 So then it *does not depend* on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.

They forgot the Power of God- Who can always find a way to rebuke human self-reliance while keeping His eternal Promises. So **Luke 3:9** repeats the warning implicit in verse 7.

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.”

John is saying, "Don't trust in the kind of tree you are. If there is no fruit that accords with repentance, you will be destroyed. It doesn't matter if the tree is Jewish or Gentile; what matters is repentance and its fruit."

Now let me conclude by defining repentance afresh now that we have seen in a new way what the Jews were being called to *turn away from* and what they were being called to *turn to*. It should make us tremble to think that a people who had such a strong God consciousness and who believed that God would keep his promises could nevertheless be called a "brood of vipers" and be threatened with hell fire. Are there not religious people today who don't believe this much but feel secure? We must look very carefully to see what repentance is here, that we too might flee the coming wrath. In view of what we have seen in John's warning, I would define repentance like this: Repentance is *turning away* from any and all reliance upon what I am by birth (like Jewish or Gentile), or what I have done by my own effort, and *turning to* the absolutely free mercy of God for the hope of salvation. Mercy by its very nature cannot be constrained or obligated by human distinctives or efforts. As Paul says in **Romans 9:15&16**,

15 For He says to Moses, “I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION.”

16 So then it *does not depend* on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.

So Salvation does not depend on Man's will or choice or human effort- but Salvation is a matter of God's Own Sovereign Mercy. But for our comfort and assurance- God has revealed in His Word that there is

one thing that *always* receives Mercy, and that is a *reliance on mercy*, which is what the New Testament calls *faith*.

Repentance, therefore, is the altering of what we rely on in life, what we hope in, what we are counting on for salvation in the age to come and for help now. The repentance that leads to forgiveness of sins is turning away from what we are by birth or achieve by effort to rely wholly on Mercy, God's free and sovereign Grace.

There is a lifestyle that follows such repentance just as surely as cats have kittens and dogs have puppies. But, Lord willing- we will talk about that next week from verses 10–14.

Let's come and pray

© 2008- 2014 by The Covenant of Peace Church. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America

The Covenant of Peace Church 13600 John Clark Road Gulfport, Mississippi 39503 228.832.7729 www.covenantofpeace.net

Scripture quotations, except those noted otherwise, are from *The New American Standard Bible* © 1996 by The Lockmann Foundation. Used by permission.

This is a single transcript in a larger series of teachings taken from a verse by verse study of **The Gospel According to Luke**. You are free to reproduce it and distribute it as the Lord leads you- without cost or reimbursement to us with the stipulation that you may not add anything or take anything away from this transcript without the express written permission of The Covenant of Peace Church and that this complete copyright statement be at the end of all copies.

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. Be watchful and quicken your pace. Soli Deo Gloria. For the Glory of God alone.