

Luke 3:7-9

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/luke/luke-3/luke-37-9/>

John issues a surprising and startling rebuke to the crowds who have heard of his popularity and have come to be baptized by him. John warns them to not simply rely on their Jewish heritage to save them from impending judgement.

The parallel gospel account for this passage is Matthew 3:7-10.

John's message of repentance resonated far and wide throughout Judea. *Crowds* gathered to see this strange man and hear what he had to say. They traveled from as far away as Jerusalem (approximately twenty miles to the west); and from all the country of Judea (Mark 1:5). In this context, Judea describes the south-central region of the Roman province in and around the city of Jerusalem (and not the entire Roman province of Jews stretching from the western shores of the Dead Sea to north of the Sea of Galilee). We know this because Matthew uses the word "district" when he describes this movement (Matthew 3:5). The district of Judea was located south of the district of Samaria, west of the Jordan River (the city of Jericho and the Jordan River valley feeding into the Dead Sea), and north of the district of Idumea. It included not only the capital city of Jerusalem but also the towns of Bethany, Bethlehem, and Jericho.

As the *crowds* came from far and wide, John did not mince words, calling them a *brood of vipers* and asking them *who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?* (v 7).

This is slightly different than what is found in Matthew 3:7, where Matthew describes John specifically addressing the "Pharisees and Sadducees" with this rebuke.

The likely reason Luke's Gospel presents John addressing the *crowds* instead of the Jewish religious authorities is due to the fact that Luke's primary audience is Gentile, while Matthew's is Jewish. Matthew's audience would appreciate the distinction between the normal *crowds* of Hebrew men and women compared to the Jewish religious authorities, so he highlights the spiritual hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Sadducees to his Jewish audience. Luke speaks to a Greek Gentile audience who would not have been able to easily distinguish between Pharisees, Sadducees, and a typical Jew, so he groups them all together as *the crowds*.

After his startling insult calling the *crowds* a *brood of vipers*, John offers them a path to reconciliation. He makes an allowance for them to repent by way of a fruit tree metaphor. The tree represents the individual person. The fruit represents the works of that individual. John tells them to *therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance* (v 8a). It seems John is making it clear that the focus is not on the baptism ritual itself. Living under the Mosaic Law, the Jews would have been cleansed often as a part of Jewish purification rituals. John tells the *crowds* that what they really need to do is change their behavior.

Repentance requires a change of heart. The Greek word that is translated as *repentance* in this verse is a form of μετανοια (G3341 – pronounced: “me-ta-noi-a”). It is a compound word consisting of “meta” meaning “change” or “transformation,” and “noia” meaning “mind” or “perspective.” Repentance is a decision that the old way of living was not a good path forward, therefore a new path must be followed. John admonishes the *crowds* to make choices, to *bear fruits* that make it clear they have charted a new course. He is insisting their current way of living is corrupt and needs to change.

John anticipates a likely objection they might raise. He warns them: *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* (v 8b).

The Jews properly had a very strong belief that they were *God’s* chosen people. *God* stated this clearly in many places, including in His statements to *Abraham*. *God* told *Abraham* he would father a great nation and bless all nations, and that He would bless those who bless, and curse those who curse *Abraham’s* descendants (Genesis 12:2-3). It seems the Jewish people had concluded from this that they enjoyed some sort of immunity from being judged by *God* for their behavior.

However, the *crowds* were ignoring the reality of *God’s* covenant with His people. Although He accepted them unconditionally as His people, because of His love for them, He still required obedience for blessing. This is the essence of the law set forth in the book of Deuteronomy, where *God* makes clear that He did not choose Israel because of their righteousness (Deuteronomy 9:4-6). Rather, it was because *God* loved them and their fathers (Deuteronomy 4:37; Deuteronomy 7:7-8). That was an irrevocable reality. *God’s* acceptance of them as His people was unconditional. He will never reject Israel as His people. However, that did not guarantee *God* would not discipline them. *God* would always keep His promise to *Abraham*, but it didn’t have to come through any particular sons of *Abraham*. John says, *for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham*. There is no basis for them to believe they won’t be held accountable by *God* for their behavior.

God made clear in His covenant with Israel that obedience was a condition for them to be blessed experientially and remain in the land (Deuteronomy 11:8-32).

John resumes his metaphor of the fruit tree, and makes clear that *God’s* judgment, His discipline, is not only certain, it is imminent. He warns of the negative consequences of failing to repent for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 3:3) and prepare for the “*kingdom of heaven* [which is now] *at hand*” (*Matthew* 3:2). John warns: *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* (v 9).

The picture John paints is that *God* has already taken out His *axe* and begun the first chop on the *trees* He will strike. The judgement is impending. If the people don’t repent soon, *God* will cut them at their *root* so that they will be removed. The *trees* to be *cut down* are ones that do *not bear good fruit*.

This phrase could indicate that the *trees* either produce rotten *fruit* or no *fruit* at all. The end result of these chopped trees is that they are *thrown into the fire*. *Fire* in the Bible is typically a metaphor for judgment. The *trees* in John's metaphor are chopped down and *thrown into the fire*. A *fruit tree* that produces bad or no *fruit* needs to be replaced. The owner of the orchard desires a *tree* that is productive. So the owner will chop *down* the unproductive *tree* and use it for firewood.

John's admonition to *repent* calls the *crowds* to change their behavior and not act unfaithfully.

If we take only John's statements specific to the metaphor (skipping over his parenthetical remarks about Abraham), we see a syllogistic warning.

The syllogism starts with the conclusion (A.) before announcing the premises (B.) and (C.)

- A. Therefore *bear fruits in keeping with repentance*
- B. *the axe is already laid at the root of the trees;*
- C. *so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

Westerners might be more inclined to arrange it this way:

- B. God is ready to call *you* to account because *you* have been found wanting, lacking *fruits*.
- C. If *you* are found wanting by lacking *fruits*, *you* will be removed, *cut down, and thrown into the fire*.
- A. Therefore repent (change your mind and your actions) so this will not occur.

How should the *crowds* have interpreted John's warning? What was John attempting to convey?

The Jews knew from Deuteronomy that *God* is a consuming fire (Deuteronomy 4:24). They also know that *God* warned their forefathers to repent or they would be exiled from the land of Judah. *God* spoke through Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The leaders did not listen, did not repent, and the nation was exiled. This can be seen many places in the Old Testament, but a passage that seems similar to John's metaphor is from Ezekiel, as follows:

“Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ‘Son of man, how is the wood of the vine better than any wood of a branch which is among the trees of the forest? Can wood be taken from it to make anything, or can men take a peg from it on which to hang any vessel? If it has been put into the fire for fuel, and the fire has consumed both of its ends and its middle part has been charred, is it then useful for anything? Behold, while it is intact, it is not made into anything. How much less, when the fire has consumed it and it is charred, can it still be made into anything! Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD, ‘As the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so have I given up the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I set My face against them. Though they have come out of the fire, yet the fire will consume them. Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I set My face against them. Thus I will make the land desolate, because they have acted unfaithfully,’” declares the Lord GOD.” (Ezekiel 15:1-8)

Ezekiel prophesies before and during Judah's exile to Babylon, roughly 600 years prior to Jesus' advent. In this passage, Ezekiel warns that Jerusalem will be consumed in judgement fire and made desolate because they had acted unfaithfully. They are as useless to *God* as a dried grapevine is useless to the vineyard owner. It isn't even fit to make a peg to hang something from. It can only be used as kindling to start a *fire*.

Jerusalem was put under siege by the Babylonians and destroyed in 586 BC. Many of its inhabitants died, and many were taken to Babylon. It seems likely that this is the sort of picture John intended to convey. The "*kingdom of heaven is at hand*." As a people, the *Jews* will decide whether to shift their allegiance to Jesus, the King of the Jews. The way they would do this is to *bear fruits in keeping with repentance*.

In a great irony, the *Jewish religious authorities* will later agree that Jesus must be assassinated in order to prevent Rome from taking away their nation (John 11:48). About 40 years later, Jerusalem will undergo another tragic destruction at the hands of the Romans, and again go into exile. Instead of welcoming the *kingdom of God*, the *Pharisees and Sadducees* will place their trust in Rome. It will have the same result as when a prior generation of leaders placed their trust in Egypt to protect them from Babylon, contrary to God's direct instructions. As a result of their unfaithfulness, Judah was defeated and exiled to Babylon. The entire books of 1 and 2 Chronicles were written to restate the history of Judah to explain the exile as God's discipline and enforcement of His covenant with Israel (1 Chronicles 9:1).

Biblical Text

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."