

BIBLE BACKGROUND

Luke 3:7-18, 21, 22

Verses 7-9

Therefore, John said to the crowds who were going out to be baptised by him, “You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father.’ For I am telling you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. Indeed, already the axe is laid at the root of the tree. Therefore, every tree not producing good fruit will be chopped down and cast into the fire.”

Three therefore's occur in these few verses and simply indicate a continuing series of statements contingent on the preceding one. Isaiah's prophecy of a voice in the wilderness (40:3-5) is seen by Luke to apply to John the Baptist. Luke sees that John was acting as the one who would make straight paths and smooth ways for the Messiah to come, that is, a people ready for him. Readiness consisted in obedience to the covenant rather than a smug presumption based on descent and ethnic identity.

Crowds were going out from Jerusalem and surrounding areas to be baptised by him, indicating that John's ministry became a mass movement. John saw the danger of a populist movement and its temptation of shallow faddishness. Collectively, they were a **brood of vipers**. The pejorative term may be a reference to the cunning of snakes (Matt 10:16), that is, the people could be duplicitous. Jesus would speak the same way about the teachers of the law (Matt 23:33). In what follows, it is clear that John is pointing out their unjust behaviour and lack of basic mercy and kindness towards others. In the way they treated others, they were without pity, like snakes, ready to strike at them. Because of this, he asks rhetorically, **who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?** It is not easy to understand what John means. Is he referring to the unreliability of the one who warned them? Is he referring to himself? Or is he suggesting that there is no escaping from the wrath to come and any warning given would be useless to them? The latter fits best.

John's activity was a preparatory one of repentance and baptism. This was meant to lead to **fruit worthy of repentance**. The analogy of the vine was used by Isaiah (5:1-7), also in Ps 88:1-15, Jeremiah (2:21) and Jesus (20:9-17). A congruent life with fruit matching intentions or statements of belief is what is in mind here. Fruit of a life matching the Lord's character of goodness was the highest sacrifice a person could offer in the Old Testament.

John attacks the smugness of the crowds by saying: **Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father.’** He cut off this line of thinking before it could start. Faithfulness to the Lord cannot be traded off by a mere appeal to descent. **For I am telling you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.** If the Lord wanted more people within Judea and Galilee, he could easily obtain them. Then, he returned to the impending judgement of God: **Indeed, already the axe is laid at the root of the tree.** God was going to address the avoidance and lazy, uncommitted stance of the people with a sever pruning or indeed, the annihilation of the nation of Israel (Mal 4:1). God is serious about the fruit of a reformed life: of goodness, moral purity, justice in society, serving the weak etc. The final statement, **every tree not producing good fruit will be chopped down and cast into the fire** indicates the removal of unproductive people from God's presence and their judgement in hell, though, the image is one of the wood of the vine or tree being burnt in a heap.

Verses 10-14

The crowds began to question him, asking, “What shall we do?” He replied to them, “He who has two shirts, hand over one to the person who has none.” Tax collectors came to be baptised and they asked him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” He gave his answer to them, “Do not collect more for yourselves than you are legally entitled to.” Soldiers asked him, “And us, what shall we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money with violence by falsely accusing people and be content with your wages.

Some in the crowds were genuinely seeking the correct path to take though the same word for crowds is used again, and could have been a non-committed question. The seekers were those considered unclean: Roman soldiers and tax collectors. Assuming their questions were genuine, the simple answers carried a principle. First, **He who has two shirts, hand over one to the person who has none** is the principle of sharing and generous giving to those who have very little. Genuine faith reveals itself in God-like activity for the Lord has giving the world to all, freely, and not just to a privileged few. **The tax collectors** were told: **Do not collect more for yourselves than you are legally entitled to.** Tax collectors worked on commissions and could take a percentage from the poll taxes, leaving open the temptation to demand more. The principle here is avoidance of corruption and coercion, the abuse of a role or office, and the oppression of poorer members of the community. Finally, **Soldiers asked him, “And us, what shall we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money with violence by falsely accusing people and be content with your wages.** The point is obvious here, too, that those with power, should never use physical threats and false accusation to force people to release themselves by paying a virtual ransom. This was simply banditry conducted under the protection of Rome. The second and third groups were to be content with their incomes.

The aim of John was to shift peoples' thinking from outward and superficial shows of religious identity to true faith, which springs from the heart. Conversion was to be full one so that a person who came under the grace of God lived a transformed existence. Once grasped and followed, the people would truly be ready for the one coming after the baptizer.

Verses 15-17

The people were waiting and all were wondering in their hearts whether John could be the Christ.

John answered saying to them all, “I am baptizing you with water but the one more powerful than I am is coming of whom I am not worthy to untie the straps of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. The winnowing fork will be in his hand to clean up his threshing floor and gather the wheat into his barn and to consume the chaff with an inextinguishable fire.

The messianic hope (Christ is Greek form anointed one, which in turn is the translation of the Hebrew word messiah) was keenly alive during the intertestamental period but particularly more so with the arrival of John at the Jordan where he conducted his prophetic ministry and baptized as a sign of repentance (vv.2,3). There, a large crowd gathered and many considered unworthy of God, such as tax-collectors and Roman soldiers, were also baptized (vv.12-14). **All were wondering in their hearts** διαλογιζομένων πάντων ενταις καρδιαις, as Mary did about the message concerning her baby and Jesus' behaviour at the age of 12 (2:19, 51). The crowd is referred to as **the people** λαου, which gives us the word laity. They were clearly considered the people faithful to God.

John identifies the one who will follow him. He is **much greater** than John, literally **stronger** ισχυρότερός. He outranks John considerably, so much so that John would not consider himself worthy of being his slave and do the menial task of removing his sandals.

Next, his much higher status enables him to **baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire** βαπτίσει εν πνεύματι αγίω και πυρί. **Fire** stands for judgement in many places in the Old Testament and was associated with great Day of the Lord when the universe would collapse and all nations come under God's wrath. However, in Act 2:1-3, the Spirit comes to believers with the appearance of tongues of fire. We know too that when God appeared to the people in the wilderness at Mount Sinai, he came with fire. God confronted Moses through a burning bush. So, it is far more likely that fire is a gospel term here.

The Holy Spirit implies several things. One, he sets a person apart for God's use (1:15). The Holy Spirit acts on a person in order to achieve the work of God as the power of God in a

personal form (1:35). The Holy Spirit fills a person so that that person can prophesy (1:41, 67; 2:25, 26; 4:18). The Holy Spirit leads a person so that God's saving mission is done (2:27; 4:1). The Holy Spirit teaches a person what to say under persecution (12:12). In short, the Holy Spirit is responsible for God's activity and it may be that in the context of his miraculous work, denial of its divine source in Christ, is a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (12:10). It is the greatest gift along side of salvation and the kingdom (11:13) and this too is probably to do with performing the work and word of God. Thus, to be submerged in the Spirit and elsewhere, people are filled, in the context of Luke's gospel, is to be able to do the work of God, the work he planned for the last times. To be baptized with the Holy Spirit is the opposite of being **chaff**, that is, people who reject God, his word and refuse to do his will. Those with the Spirit are set apart for God, do his will, proclaiming his word and hastening the coming of his kingdom. In the broader sweep of the New Testament, the Holy Spirit creates faith and brings us into a relationship with God through the gospel of Christ. But, here, it has more to do with being empowered to live and speak his word as God wishes us to.

The figure that comes after John is responsible for separating those who belong to God and those who do not. The image of winnowing is mixed with a portrayal of hell as an **inextinguishable fire**. John saw the coming of the Christ as the final event of history leading to the judgement of all but also the empowering of the church by the Spirit to carry out the mission of God to the final conclusion of this world. See Malachi 4:1.

Verse 18

With many other exhortations he preached the good news to the people.

It is not immediately apparent that John's preaching was actually **good news** (preaching the good news is the translation of one word in the Greek, ευαγγελίζετο). 4:18 and 9:6 make clear that Jesus continued this preaching and was indeed the centre of the good news of salvation. Salvation, was initially the coming of Christ who conferred a kingdom on those who responded in faith (6:20). The good news was the coming of God to liberate his people from oppression and bring forgiveness and the renewal of the world through his gracious rule. But this came to be defined in greater detail through Jesus' act of redemption through cross and resurrection and his radical teaching of love.

Verses 21, 22

It happened that when all the people were being baptized and when Jesus was baptized and while he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form as a dove. A voice from heaven said, "You are my beloved son. I am very pleased with you."

The climax of this episode is not that Jesus was baptized. In Matthew's gospel, John has a problem with this. Luke sees that Jesus' coming to John for baptism was quite normal. The extraordinary event was the descending of the Holy Spirit and the voice of God.

The Holy Spirit descended in bodily form as a dove σωματικω ειδει ως περιστεραν. Elsewhere in the gospels, the Spirit comes to a person without any outward form, for the third person of the Trinity is spirit, without form. But for Jesus, he takes on a visible form, just as God's voice is heard, supposedly by others. Normally, when the heavens are opened, though here heaven is in the singular, and probably does not refer to sky but to heaven itself, a vision or revelation of God occurs (Ezekiel 1:1). But God comes upon Jesus in the person of the Holy Spirit in the physical manifestation of the dove. It is God who comes to Jesus; this is the import of the passage. Why a dove? The dove flew above the flood waters when Noah released it from the ark and these flood waters are associated with the water of the Jordan (Genesis 8:8) and in the New Testament the flood is a symbol of Christian baptism (1Peter 3:21).

Jesus is in a unique position. Through John's baptism and the waters of the Jordan, he received the bodily presence of God from heaven in the Holy Spirit and is thus anointed not with oil but with God in Spirit. What he says and what he does from this point on are clearly from God

himself and accomplished by God in Christ. He has an authoritative word and effective action that will succeed in completing God's will to save.

The voice of God comes from heaven and picks up Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1. The latter speaks of the servant of God on whom rests God's Spirit so that salvation and judgement can be exercised over the nations. In Psalm 2:7, the coronation of a Davidic king includes in the formulas a reference to the king being God's son (an adopted agent of God). Jesus is God's Son by baptism in the truest sense. He is not merely God's Son but God's **beloved Son** ο υιός μου ο αγαπητός. An exclusive love rests on Jesus from God himself. God loves all but a unique and singular love is reserved for this son.

Up to this point in Jesus' life, he has done all things so well, matured in wisdom and understanding of the Lord, in compassion and obedience, that God can say, **I am very pleased with you**. No human being in all of history has deserved this affirmation. Now, the mission of God can go forward so that humanity is saved, a baptism of the Holy Spirit can be granted to all through Christ, and heaven is opened for all.