

Flee from the Wrath to Come (Luke 3:1–20)

“Life! Life! Eternal Life!”

As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place, where was a den; and I laid me down in that place to sleep: and as I slept, I dreamed a dream. I dreamed, and behold, “I saw a man clothed with rags, standing in a certain place, with his face from his own house, a book in his hand, and a great burden upon his back,” Is. lxiv. 6. Lu. xiv. 33. Ps. xxxviii.4. Hab. ii. 2. Ac. xvi. 31. Ac. ii. 37. I looked, and saw him open the book, and read therein; and as he read, he wept and trembled; and not being able longer to contain, he brake out with a lamentable cry, saying, “What shall I do?” Ac. ii. 37.¹

In this plight, therefore, he went home, and refrained himself as long as he could, that his wife and children should not perceive his distress; but he could not be silent long, because that his trouble increased. Wherefore at length he brake his mind to wife and children; and thus he began to talk to them: “O my dear wife,” said he, “and you, the children of my bowels, I, your dear friend, am in myself undone, by reason of a burden that lieth hard upon me; moreover, I am for certain informed that this our city will be burned with fire from heaven; in which fearful overthrow, both myself, with thee, my wife, and you, my sweet babes, shall miserably come to ruin, except (the which yet I see not) some way of escape can be found, whereby we may be delivered.” At this, his relations were sore amazed; not for that they believed what he had said to them was true, but because they thought that some frenzy distemper had got into his head; therefore, it drawing towards night, and they hoping that sleep might settle his brains, with all haste they got him to bed. But the night was as troublesome to him as the day; wherefore, instead of sleeping, he spent it in sighs and tears. So when the morning was come, they would know how he did; he told them, worse and worse; he also set to talking to them again, but they began to be hardened. They also thought to drive away his distemper by harsh and surly carriages to him. Sometimes they would deride, sometimes they would

¹ Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress, Part One*, III.89.

chide, and sometimes they would quite neglect him. Wherefore he began to retire himself to his chamber to pray for, and pity them, and also to condole his own misery. He would also walk solitarily in the fields, sometimes reading, and sometimes praying; and thus for some days he spent his time.

Now I saw upon a time, when he was walking in the fields, that he was, as he was wont, reading in his book, and greatly distressed in his mind; and as he read, he burst out, as he had done before, crying, “What shall I do to be saved?” Ac. xvi. 30, 31.

I saw also that he looked this way and that way, as if he would run; yet he stood still, because, as I perceived, he could not tell which way to go. I looked then, and saw a man named Evangelist coming to him, who asked, “Wherefore dost thou cry?”

He answered, Sir, I perceive, by the book in my hand, that I am condemned to die, and after that to come to judgment, He. ix. 27; and I find that I am not willing (Job xvi. 21, 22) to do the first, nor able (Eze. xxii. 14) to do the second. Then said Evangelist, Why not willing to die, since this life is attended with so many evils? The man answered, “Because I fear that this burden that is upon my back will sink me lower than the grave; and I shall fall into Tophet. Is. xxx. 33. And, Sir, if I be not fit to go to prison, I am not fit, I am sure, to go to judgment, and from thence to execution; and the thoughts of these things make me cry. Then said Evangelist, If this be thy condition, why standest thou still? He answered, Because I know not whither to go. Then he gave him a parchment roll, and there was written within, “Fly from the wrath to come.” Mat. iii. 7.

The man therefore, read it, and looking upon Evangelist very carefully, said, Whither must I fly? Then said Evangelist, pointing with his finger over a very wide field, Do you see yonder wicket gate? Mat. vii. 13. The man said, No. Then said the other, Do you see yonder shining light? Ps. cxix. 105. 2 Pe. i. 19. He said, I think I do. Then said Evangelist, Keep that light in your eye, and go up directly thereto, so shalt thou see the gate; at which, when thou knockest, it shall be told thee what thou shalt do.

So I saw in my dream that the man began to run. Now, he had not ran far from his own door, but his wife and children perceiving it, began to cry after him to return, Lu. xiv. 26; but the man put his fingers in his ears, and ran on crying, Life! life! Eternal life! So he looked not behind him, Ge. xix. 17, but fled towards the middle of the plain.²

² Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress, Part One*, III.89–90.

Many of you will recognize that as the iconic opening scene of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Christian, the central protagonist of Bunyan's immortal allegory, is wandering about the fields outside of his city, the City of Destruction, in utter misery, trembling in fear and under immense conviction of guilt (symbolized by the great burden upon his back) because of what he has read in his book (the Bible). And what has he read? Christian tells his wife, "I . . . am in myself undone, by reason of a burden that lieth hard upon me; moreover, I am for certain informed that this our city will be burned with fire from heaven; in which fearful overthrow, both myself, with thee, my wife, and you, my sweet babes, shall miserably come to ruin, except (the which yet I see not) some way of escape can be found, whereby we may be delivered." He has read of the wrath to come. And because of his conviction, he has no rest, day or night. He knows he is under the sentence of damnation, but he does not know what to do about it... until he meets with Evangelist, who hands him a parchment scroll on which is written the words, "Flee from the wrath to come," and points him to the wicket gate, on which he must knock and through which he must enter in order to embark upon the King's Highway, the way of salvation.

This scene was played out in the days of John the Baptist, when he came into all the regions of Judea, warning the people of God's wrath and judgment, commanding them to flee from the coming wrath, and pointing them to the only way of escape—namely, repentance of sin and faith in the coming Christ. I have prayed, and am praying, that this scene will be played out in some of your lives this morning, for I intend to follow John's lead by warning you of God's coming wrath, by commanding you to flee from the coming wrath, and by pointing you to Christ, in whom alone there is refuge from the coming wrath. John the Baptist was the messenger, sent to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah. I hope to follow in his footsteps by preparing you for the advent of Christ. For though Christ has already come and by His life, death, and resurrection secured the redemption of His elect, He then ascended into heaven where He reigns until the final day of the Lord, when He will come again in salvation and judgment. And only those who are prepared for His return will be saved. The Lord Jesus emphasized this point repeatedly:

"Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was

coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” (Mt 24:42–44)

So we stand in fundamentally the same position as John’s original audience—we await the imminent advent of Christ, and therefore, we must be prepared. My aim this morning is to tell you how.

I. The Messenger of Preparation (3:1–2)

Let’s begin with the messenger of preparation—John the Baptist. As is consistent with Luke’s purpose and his adamant assertion that the events he records are historical, that they actually happened (cf. 1:5; 2:1–2), Luke once again locates John’s ministry in their historical context. Look with me at vv. 1–2:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. (3:1–2)

Luke provides us with no less than seven historical markers by which we may date the start of John’s ministry:³

- “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar.” Tiberius Caesar succeeded Caesar Augustus upon the latter’s death in AD 14, and he reigned until AD 37. Thus, the fifteenth year of his reign would be about AD 28.
- “Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea.” Pontius Pilate is, of course, infamous as the one who ultimately condemned Jesus to death, ordering that He be scourged and crucified. Pilate ruled as governor of Judea from AD 26–36.

³ The following historical data is gleaned from James R. Edwards, *The Gospel of Luke*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 103–4; and David E. Garland, *Luke*, ECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2011), 152–52.

- “Herod being tetrarch of Galilee.” After the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC, Rome divided his kingdom into three regions known as “tetrarchies,” assigning one to each of his three sons. The Herod who was the tetrarch of Galilee is also known as Herod Antipas, and he ruled from 4 BC until AD 39. He is the Herod to whom Pilate sent Jesus (23:6–16), and the Herod who imprisoned and ultimately beheaded John the Baptist (3:19–20; Mt 14:1–11).
- “His brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis.” Philip reigned from 4 BC to AD 34, and is unknown in the Gospels. He is not the same Philip whose wife, Herodias, divorced him in order to marry his brother Herod Antipas (Mt 14:3–4), an adulterous relationship John the Baptist publicly condemned, thus landing him in prison and eventually costing him his head. Ituraea and Trachonitis lay to the northeast of the Sea of Galilee.
- “Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene.” Lysanias reigned from 4 BC to AD 37, and is unknown in the Gospels. Abilene was (likely) the region northwest of Mount Hermon.
- “During the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.” Annas was something of the “Godfather” of Jewish high priests. Though he served as high priest from AD 6–15, he continued to exercise influence over the priesthood through his sons (Eleazar [AD 16–17]; Jonathan [AD 36–37]; Theophilus [AD 37–41]; Matthias [AD 41–44]; Ananus [AD 62]), and his son-in-law Caiaphas, who served from AD 18–36, hence Luke’s mention of both men in association with the high priesthood. Both Annas and Caiaphas interrogated Jesus on the night He was betrayed (Jn 18:12–14, 19–24).

But Luke’s purpose is not merely to date the ministry of John. Were that the case, he needed only state that it was “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar,” and that would have sufficed. Why, then, did Luke list the other six rulers? I suspect it is a subtle declaration of the sovereignty of God and the strangeness of His gospel. Luke lists seven rulers, the seven most powerful men in Judea in AD 28.⁴ And yet, the LORD sends His word to none of

⁴ Garland counts “the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar” from the beginning of his coregency with Augustus (AD 11/12), and thus arrives at a date of AD 26/27; Garland, 151. Edwards says this is unlikely, citing Alfred Plummer, who “argues for twenty-eight because (1) Tiberius was associated with Augustus only in his last two years, but not co-emperor (Suetonius, *Tib.*, 21); (2) when Augustus died, Tiberius was not regarded by himself or by others as emperor (Tacitus, *Ann.* 1.5–7); and (3) “No instance is known of reckoning the reign of Tiberius from his

them, but rather to a young man dwelling in the desert. The LORD is going to inaugurate His kingdom, not through any earthly power, but through a crucified Messiah whose advent is announced by a desert prophet. David Garland states,

The list here comprises an impressive bunch, but not an admirable bunch. They appear to have far more influence than John. Little did they know that in Judea, with an unacclaimed prophet, God was moving in ways that would shake their rule and have ultimate consequences on the history of humankind. The coming of God's word brings the empire one step closer to the oblivion it deserves.⁵

This, too, is part of every mountain and hill being made low (3:5).⁶

That “the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness” is significant, for the word of God had not come to Israel for centuries. After the death of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, the prophetic word ceased in Israel. This is testified not only in Psalm 74:9, where Asaph laments,

*We do not see our signs;
there is no longer any prophet;
and there is none among us who knows how long. (Ps 74:9)*

but also in the intertestamental books that make up the Apocrypha (1 Macc 4:46; 9:27; 14:41), and the rabbinical writings (Str-B 1.125–34; 2.128–34). Even Josephus (*Against Apion* 1.41) mentions that there was no prophet in Israel. Everyone in Israel knew that the LORD had gone silent for nearly five hundred years, until “the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in

association with Augustus”; Edwards, 103n7; quoting Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke*, 5th ed., ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1900), 82.

⁵ Garland, 153.

⁶ “The word of God appears among the powerful and prestigious, but not to them. With acid irony, Luke reports that ‘the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness’ (v. 2). The names before John are accompanied by titles and offices: emperor, prefect, tetrarch, high priest. John has no title or office. The names before John are associated with places of importance: Rome, Sepphoris, Jerusalem. John lives in a place with no name, ‘in the wilderness.’ People must leave their comforts and securities and *go out* to the wilderness. In Israel’s history, the wilderness represents a place of testing, repentance, and grace. God brought deliverance to fledgling Israel in the wilderness of Sinai following the exodus (Exod 15–20), and thereafter the wilderness, both literally (Elijah, 1 Kgs 17:2–3) and figuratively (Jer 2:2–3; Hos 2:14–23) became a place of prophetic hope”; Edwards, 106.

the wilderness.”⁷ The location (the wilderness) is also of symbolic importance, for two reasons. First, it identifies John with the Old Testament prophets, particularly Elijah (1 Kgs 17:1–7; 19:1–18; cf. Mal 4:5–6; Lk 1:17). And second, it identifies Jerusalem with Egypt. One might have expected John to carry the word of God to Jerusalem, for that was where the people were. But he doesn’t. He remains in the wilderness and calls the people Israel to come out to him if they would flee the wrath to come, leaving behind those things (Abrahamic ancestry, adherence to the Law of Moses, etc.) in which they trusted.

The Ministry of Preparation (3:3–6)

We move next the ministry of preparation, which is described in vv. 3–6:

And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.’⁸

Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall become straight,

and the rough places shall become level ways,

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’” (3:3–6)

As we have often noted, John’s ministry of preparation was foretold by the prophets. When the angel announced John’s birth to Zechariah, he cited the prophecy in Malachi:

⁷ Edwards, 117n56. Garland adds the insightful comment that, “Readers familiar with the Old Testament narrative would know that prophets clash with the potentates in power who would try to squelch their message if it were unwelcomed news. Informed readers also know that when God is about to do something or is angry about something, a prophet shows up. John is not a scribe, interpreting indirectly the word of God, but a prophet who speaks directly for God and announces God’s impending judgment”; Garland, 153.

⁸ The LXX reads “make straight paths for our God” (Is 40:3); Luke reads “make *his* paths straight,” referring to Jesus. According to Edwards, “Already in Luke’s day, terminology and categories that had historically been attributed to God were attributed to Jesus. A high Christology (if not its precise formulation) is already present in first-century Christianity”; Edwards, 109.

“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. . . . Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”
(Mal 3:1; 4:5–6)

Now in chapter three, Luke announces John’s ministry as the fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3–5. In the ancient world, when a king planned to make an official visit to a city, he would send an emissary ahead of him to ensure that the people were properly prepared and that the road leading into the city was sufficiently tended for the king to arrive safely and with appropriate ceremony. Isaiah picked up this imagery and applied it to the ministry of the messianic forerunner. Luke, then, identifies that messianic forerunner as John.⁹ Luke highlights two aspects of the ministry of this “voice of one crying in the wilderness.”

First, it was a ministry of preaching. “John went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” “Proclaiming” (κηρύσσων) refers to public proclamation, like what I am doing today.¹⁰ People are prepared for the coming of Christ by hearing and heeding the preaching of the Word. Preaching, therefore, must occupy a central role in our ministry of preparation. Week by week, sermon by sermon, passage by passage, we are preparing the way of the Lord, making His paths straight.

Second, it was a ministry of baptism. John proclaimed “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Four notes about John’s baptism are in order.

- First, the *origin* of his baptism. Was this a completely new concept? We do not read of baptism in the Old Testament, but it does appear that by the time of the New Testament, some Jewish groups were baptizing Gentile converts to Judaism—so-called proselyte baptism. While the precise background of John’s baptism is a much-debated topic that we do not have time to explore, I find Leon Morris’ explanation compelling. He writes, “Baptism was a rite of cleansing in a number of religions. It seems certain that at this time the Jews used proselyte baptism, a ceremony to cleanse

⁹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke, Volume 1: Luke 1–12*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009), 117–18, citing David Gooding, *According to Luke: A New Exposition of the Third Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 73.

¹⁰ Edwards, 108.

converts from the defilement they saw as characteristic of all Gentiles. The sting in John's practice was that he applied to Jews the ceremony they regarded as suitable for unclean Gentiles."¹¹

- Second, the *mode* of his baptism. The word Luke uses, βάπτισμα, means "to dip fully, to plunge or immerse."¹² Josephus, a first-century Palestinian Jew and a contemporary of Luke, uses the word for the plunging of a sword into a throat, for the sinking of a ship, and for the drowning of a child.¹³ Thus, when John baptized those who confessed their sins, he immersed them in the Jordan River.
- Third, the *candidates* of his baptism. Whom did John baptize? He baptized those who made a credible profession of faith and repentance. Clearly, if this was a "baptism of repentance" (βάπτισμα μετανοίας), then only the repentant are qualified for baptism. And clearly, they repented because they believed John's preaching about the coming wrath of God and the coming Messiah of God. If they hadn't believed, they would not have repented. Why do I say *credible*? I say *credible* because v. 7 indicates that John rejected some who came for baptism because he did not believe their repentance was sincere.¹⁴ Likewise, then, in our ministry of preparation, we must only baptize upon a credible profession of repentance and faith. Unless there are "fruits in keeping with repentance" (καρπὸς ἀξίους τῆς μετανοίας), we have no right to administer baptism. Unless those engaged in immorality forsake their immoral relationship, we ought not baptize them. Unless those engaged in theft forsake their fraud and repay

¹¹ Leon Morris, *Luke*, TNTC (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1974, 1988), 112. See Edwards, 107–8, for a discussion of possible links between John's baptism and both proselyte baptism and the Qumran washings. Edwards denies any such link, concluding, "John's baptism more likely recalls and revives God's foundational covenant with Israel at Sinai, in which the entire people were summoned to be 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exod 19:6; also 1 Pet 2:9)."

¹² Edwards, 107.

¹³ Garland writes, "I have chosen to use the translation 'immersion' (βάπτισμα) and 'immerse' (βαπτίζω) rather than to transliterate the noun and verb as 'baptism' and 'baptize' (as is commonly done). The terms were used in Judaism for the immersion required in ritual washing (see 4 Kgdms 5:14; Jdt 12:7; Sir 34:25, 30; Mark 7:4). The description of Jesus coming up 'out of the water' in Mark 1:10 and Matt 3:16 clearly depicts immersion. Josephus used the term for plunging a sword into a throat (*J. W.* 2.18.4 §476). He also used it for 'sinking' (*J. W.* 2.20.1 §556; 3.8.5 §368; 3.9.2 §423; 3.10.9 §§525, 527; *Ant.* 9.10.2 §212; *Life* §15) and for 'drowning' or 'holding under water' (*J. W.* 1.22.2 §437; *Ant.* 15.3.4 §55). This usage explains how it could be employed metaphorically for being 'overwhelmed.' Jesus uses the metaphor for his passion (Mark 10:38–39; Luke 12:50). The outer sign of being submerged conveys the image of the drowning of the old life"; Garland, 154n9.

¹⁴ "John said this [vv. 7–9] because some of his groupies were phonies. They were insincere. They wanted to get baptized, but they really had no intention of leading a godly life"; Ryken, 120.

what they've taken, we ought not baptize them. Repentance need not be perfect, but it must be evident. This also speaks to the question of when to baptize a child. When is a child qualified for baptism? Surely the least we could say on the matter is that a child is qualified for baptism when he is capable of making a credible profession of repentance and faith, the credibility of repentance established by the fruits of repentance. Knowing the facts of the gospel is not the fruits of repentance. Desiring baptism is not the fruits of repentance. If we baptize our children too soon, we run the risk of creating the very kind of people who would say with the Jews in v. 8, "We have Abraham as our father"—the very kind of people John refused to baptize. We will speak more on the issue of childhood baptism in our Pastor Talk in December.

- Fourth, the *meaning* of his baptism. This was a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (βάπτισμα μετάνοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν). This language trips people up sometimes, for at first glimpse it appears to imply a causal relationship between baptism and the forgiveness of sins (the exact phrase recurs in Acts 2:38). When we recite the Nicene Creed, which says, "We affirm one baptism for the forgiveness of sins," people sometimes come up to me and question that language. My response is that it is biblical language. That is what Mark calls it (Mk 1:4); that is what Luke calls it (Lk 3:3); that is what Peter calls it (Acts 2:38). But does it imply a causal relationship? Does baptism cause the forgiveness of sins? No. The forgiveness of sins (i.e. justification) arises from God's grace alone, is effected by the blood of Christ alone, and is received through faith alone, apart from works... including baptism (Rom 3:21–26; Eph 2:8–9). Rather, baptism is *sign* of our repentance and a *sign* of God's forgiveness. In baptism, we signify our repentance as we bury our old man in the watery grave; and in baptism, God signifies our forgiveness as we are plunged beneath the cleansing waters.

Preaching and baptism—these were the essential elements of John's ministry of preparation. These same elements remain essential today.

The Means of Preparation (3:7–18)

But how shall we personally prepare for the imminent advent of Christ? That question is answered in vv. 7–18, wherein we find five essential means of preparation. If you would assure

your heart today that you are ready to meet Christ at His coming, then examine yourself to see whether you have these five elements. And if you know that you are not ready to meet Christ, then take these five steps in order to be prepared.

I. Reckon with the Coming Wrath (v. 7)

The first step to being prepared for the second advent of Christ is to reckon with the coming wrath. Among all those coming out to the Jordan to receive John's baptism, there were some (Matthew reports that they were Pharisees and Sadducees [Mt 3:7]) whom John sensed were unrepentant and insincere, such that all their immersion in the Jordan River would accomplish was to get them wet.¹⁵ We will find out in the coming verses that they were trusting in their identity as children of Abraham (v. 8), and were professing repentance without bearing its fruits (vv. 8–9). But the first problem John identified was that they had not reckoned with the coming wrath of God.

He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (3:7)

This is quite the message. Philip Ryken imagines how it might sound in a 21st-century suburban American church:

"You know what you people are? You're all a bunch of hypocrites! You go to church on Sunday, but then you forget about God the rest of the week. You're living a double life. You say that you belong to God, but then you secretly go indulge in all kinds of sinful pleasures. You live in your nice big houses and drive around in your fancy cars, but you never do anything to help the poor. You snakes! Do you really think that God is going to save you just because you've been baptized and belong to an evangelical church? Listen, unless you turn away from your sins, you're going straight to hell."¹⁶

¹⁵ "This may be intended as a wake-up call to drive home the gravity of their situation. It will not be remedied by a dip in the Jordan River. . . . [John] does not believe that his immersion rite has any saving efficacy in itself"; Garland, 155.

¹⁶ Ryken, 114.

“Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” What was John asking? I think the sense is, “Who told you that you could flee from the wrath to come merely by professing repentance and receiving my baptism, without bearing the fruits of repentance? Because it certainly was not me!”¹⁷ These insincere, unrepentant, unconverted baptismal candidates had failed to reckon with the reality of God’s wrath and the gravity of their own sin if they thought that they could utter a few words, take a dip in the Jordan River, and receive the coming messianic salvation.

Let’s not make the same mistake. Let’s not think so lightly of God’s wrath and our own sin that we imagine God can be appeased and His wrath propitiated by the mere performance of religious rites. If we would reckon with the wrath of God, we must reckon with four aspects of His divine wrath:

- God’s wrath is *fierce*. It is not something to be overlooked or downplayed or underestimated.

“But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? . . . For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.” (Mal 3:2; 4:1)

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. . . . for our God is a consuming fire. (Heb 10:31; 12:29)

- God’s wrath is *righteous*. It accords with strict justice. It is not a divine temper tantrum; it does not arise from divine insecurity. Wrath is the righteous response to evil; judgment is the righteous response to sin. The reason we are so uncomfortable with the notion of divine wrath is because we think so little of human sin. But if we saw the divine glory and human sin with eyes unclouded by iniquity, we would

¹⁷ I. Howard Marshall surveys three possibilities before concluding that John meant, “Who has shown you how to flee from the wrath to come (merely by being baptised or by feigning conversion)?” He writes, “The question is rhetorical and indicates the sheer impossibility of escaping the coming total judgment, certainly not by any external, *ex opere operato* rite. John wanted the people to be baptized — but only if they were repentant”; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 139.

acknowledge the perfectly just nature of God's wrath. That is precisely what happens in Revelation 14 and 19 when God's wrath is poured out upon earth:

And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say,

*"Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was,
for you brought these judgments.*

*For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets,
and you have given them blood to drink.*

It is what they deserve!"

And I heard the altar saying,

*"Yes, Lord God the Almighty,
true and just are your judgments!" (Rv 14:5–7; cf. 19:1–3)*

- God's wrath is *infinite*. This is true for two reasons. First, sin is an offense against the infinite God, thus incurring infinite guilt. The gravity of a sin is measured by the dignity of the one sinned against. Second, hell is not purgatory; it does not cure evil. On the contrary, in hell the restraining grace of God is removed, such that sinners become exceedingly and endlessly wicked, like a criminal who commits more crimes while in jail. Therefore, God is always and ever provoked to wrath.
- God's wrath is *satisfied* only in the blood of His Son. Only the offering, the sacrifice, of one possessing infinite glory could answer to infinite wrath. When Christ died on the cross in the place of sinners, God's wrath was spent, absorbed in its entirety. And if it took the death of the Son of God to satisfy God's wrath, why on earth do we think that a few mumbled words and a half-hearted dip in the water would do the trick?

Have you reckoned with the gravity of your own sin, and the reality of God's wrath that it has provoked? You are not prepared to meet Christ until you have.

II. *Reject False Hopes of Salvation (v. 8)*

The second step to being prepared for the second advent of Christ is to reject false hopes of salvation. John exposed the false hope of those coming to him for baptism whom he deemed insincere:

“Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin 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.” (3:8)

As John deemed them insincere, they clearly were not trusting in the mercy of God about to poured out through the Messiah. In what, then, were they trusting for salvation? They were trusting in their ethnic and religious descent from Abraham. It is doubtful that they believed that *every* ethnic Jew would be saved, but certainly the religious ones would be, right?! Surely those who received circumcision, offered the sacrifices, kept the law, attended the feasts, and did all the things... surely they would be saved?!¹⁸ John says, in no uncertain terms, that no, ethnic and religious descent from Abraham does not save. Only those Jews (and Gentiles) who truly repent and trust in mercy of God through the Messiah of God are the children of Abraham and will inherit the Abrahamic promise. The apostle Paul was in complete agreement:

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. . . . And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise. (Gal 3:7, 29)

What are you trusting in for salvation? There is only one true hope, and that is the mercy of God through the Messiah of God. All other hopes are false and vain. The modern version of “I am a member of Abraham’s family, and I keep the law,” is “I am a member of an evangelical church and I do all the things—I’ve been baptized, I attend regularly (when there’s no kid’s sports activities), I take Bible study classes, I serve in AWANA, etc.” But I would say to you today the same thing John said to the crowds in his day—external membership in God’s family and

¹⁸ Though David Garland provides an example from the Mishnah (*b. Erub.* 19a) of an absolute promise of salvation for all the children of Abraham; Garland, 156.

external adherence to God's law cannot and will not save. If you would be prepared for the second advent of Christ, you must abandon every false hope of salvation.

III. Repent and Reform (vv. 8–14)

Third, if you would be prepared for the second advent of Christ, you must repent and reform—that is, you must profess repentance *and* bear fruits in keeping with repentance.

“Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin 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.” (3:8–9)

Mere words are worthless; good intentions avail nothing. The sincerity of repentance is borne out by the fruit of repentance. When God comes in judgment, when the axe begins to cut down the evil trees of this world, He will look for fruits, not words or intentions. It is an inexorable truth that fruitless trees will be cut down on the day of judgment.

The leaders of the Jews did not receive John's warning, and did not repent (7:29–30). Many in the crowds were receptive to John's message, and wanted more concrete instruction on what John meant by “bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” In response to three requests from three different groups (the crowds, tax collectors, soldiers), John provides three examples of fruit-bearing repentance:

And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” (3:10–11)

If you have a surplus, and you see someone in legitimate need, and you refuse to give out of your surplus, this can only be due to greed (1 Jn 3:17).¹⁹ What, then, would the fruit of repentance look like? Generosity. Give away your extra tunic; give away your extra food.

¹⁹ “If they cannot give a shirt away, they do not own the shirt; it owns them”; Garland, 157.

Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” (3:12–13)

In the Roman system of taxation, while land and poll taxes were collected by the Romans, other taxes (tolls and customs, for instance) were contracted out. These tax contractors were able to set their own tax rates, and the citizens had little to no recourse. There was no oversight, no accountability. According to David Garland, “With no ‘supervisory bureaucracy,’ there were no restraints against cheaters among the agents, and it was assumed that they used their office to engage in theft.”²⁰ What, then, would it look like for a tax collector to repent? Stop defrauding the citizens. Collect only as much as required (διατεταγμένον), and no more.

Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.” (3:14)

Luke does not say whether these were Roman or Jewish soldiers. If the former, this would mean that Gentiles attended John’s ministry as well as Jews. If the latter, they were probably soldiers of Herod Antipas.²¹ In either case, it is clear that they had a reputation for extortion. Leon Morris writes, “Citizens could have little redress when troops used violence or false charges to rob them.”²² What, then, would it look like for a soldier to repent? They must stop extorting citizens by threatening them with harm or lodging false accusations against them; rather, they must do their job with honor and integrity, and be content with their wages.

Let’s not make this more complex than it is. If your repentance does not bring about reform of your attitudes, words, and actions, then you haven’t actually repented. How do you know when an adulterer has repented? When they forsake their adultery and do whatever is necessary and appropriate to restore their marriage. How do you know when a porn addict has

²⁰ Garland, 158; citing Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Luke*, trans. David E. Green (Atlanta: John Knox, 1984), 74.

²¹ Edwards contends, “Roman legions were not stationed in Palestine in the first century, and Palestinian Jews were exempt from serving in the Roman army. The ‘soldiers’ in v. 14 therefore may have been enlisted Jews in the service of Herod Antipas rather than Roman soldiers”; Edwards, 112. Yet do not the Gospels reveal the presence of Roman soldiers in Palestine (the centurion [Mt 8:5–13; Lk 7:1–10]; the soldiers at the crucifixion [Mt 27:27; Mk 15:16]; the centurion at the cross [Mt 27:54; Mk 15:39]; the soldiers at the tomb [Mt 27:65–66; 28:11–15])?

²² Morris, 114.

repented? When they stop accessing pornography, and do whatever is necessary and appropriate to restore broken relationships. How do you know when a sexually immoral couple has repented? When they stop engaging in sexual immorality, and do whatever is necessary and appropriate to live in purity. How do you know when a pathological liar has repented? When they stop all forms of deceit and do whatever is necessary and appropriate to speak truth. How do you know when a greedy person has repented? When they stop accumulating and start giving. We could go on and on. But the point is, when Jesus returns on the day of judgment, He will not look for people who said they repented of immorality and deception and greed, or who intended to repent of immorality and deception and greed; He will look for those who are pure and truthful and generous. Everyone else will be cut down and burned.

IV. Seek Refuge in the Returning Messiah (vv. 15–17)

Fourth, if you would be prepared for the second advent of Christ, you must seek refuge from the coming wrath in the returning Messiah. Calling men and women to repentance was only half of John's ministry; he was also sent to announce and identify the coming Messiah. Indeed, apart from his ministry of announcing and identifying the coming Messiah, his preaching of repentance would have been in vain, for repentance, in and of itself, never saved anyone. Repentance does not atone for sin; repentance does not save from wrath. The justice of God demands satisfaction; the righteousness of God cries out for vindication; the law of God must be fulfilled. Repentance accomplishes none of that. You do not flee the wrath of God to repentance; you flee the wrath of God *through* repentance *to* the refuge of Christ.

As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (3:15–17)

John was a powerful figure; the Holy Spirit filled him and flowed out of him. As there had been no prophet in Israel for five centuries, the very presence of a Spirit-filled prophet provoked

questions about whether John might be the promised Messiah. But John knew who he was; he knew his role. He was the messenger, not the Messiah; he was the forerunner, not the main event. So John pointed the crowds to the coming Messiah, “the one mightier than I . . . , the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.” John had yet to see Jesus; that will happen in next week’s text. But John knew He was coming, and when He appeared, He would bring salvation and judgment. These two works are then described in the parallel images of baptism and harvest.

The coming Christ will baptize in the Holy Spirit, which John distinguishes from His own baptism in water. John’s baptism was a symbol; Jesus’ baptism is the substance. John’s baptism signified the forgiveness of sins; Jesus’ baptism actually cleanses from sin. What does it mean to be baptized in (ἐν) the Holy Spirit? It means to be immersed “into the power and person of God.”²³ It is a metaphorical way of speaking of the Holy Spirit’s regenerating, sanctifying work in conversion. When a person is baptized in water, they emerge from that water outwardly clean. But when a person is baptized in the Holy Spirit, they emerge a new creature in Christ (2 Cor 5:17), inwardly clean and new. To be baptized in the Holy Spirit is to be born again (Jn 3:3, 5); to receive the “washing of regeneration” (Ti 3:5).

On the other hand, the coming Christ will baptize with fire. This could be connected to the baptism in the Holy Spirit and refer to its purifying, sanctifying effect. The prophet Malachi said the Messiah would be “like a refiner’s fire” (Mal 3:2–3).²⁴ But I think it more likely that the baptism of fire refers to Christ’s final judgment. For the very next verse seems to offer a parallel—the wheat (those baptized in the Spirit) is gathered into the barn; the chaff is burned with unquenchable fire.²⁵ In other words, everyone will be baptized by Christ—either He will baptize you in the Spirit now, and you will be regenerated, renewed, cleansed, sanctified, transformed; or He will baptize you with fire then, and you will be burned, consumed, destroyed. John’s message is that the only refuge from the wrath of God is in the Christ of God, who alone can baptize in the Spirit of God. Do not settle for baptism in water; you must go to Christ for the baptism in the Holy Spirit. For unless you are baptized in the Holy Spirit, you will surely be baptized in the fire of God’s wrath.

²³ Edwards, 114. “John could put repentant people in water; in a sense, anybody could. Only One who was God could put people in the Holy Spirit, or the Holy Spirit in people”; Gooding, 76, quoted in Ryken, 130.

²⁴ “‘Holy Spirit and fire’ seem to refer to a dual character of baptism as both a purification and a refinement, perhaps recalling again the ‘falling and rising’ motif in 2:34 (similarly Isa 4:4–5; 32:15; 44:3; Ezek 36:25–26; Mal 3:2–3)”; Edwards, 114;

²⁵ Ryken 131–32.

V. *Receive Baptism (v. 18)*

Finally, if you would be prepared for the second advent of Christ, you must receive baptism. Though we have been at pains to assert that baptism does not effect (is not the instrumental means of) the forgiveness of sins, this does not render baptism optional or unnecessary. Remember the description of John's ministry in v. 3, and summarized in v. 18:

And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (3:3)

So with many other exhortations he preached the good news to the people. (3:18)

Clearly, "preached the good news" in v. 18 means "preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." In other words, even after proclaiming that while he only baptized with water but the coming Christ would baptize with the Holy Spirit, John continued to baptize with water. And after Jesus began His ministry, and began to baptize people with the Holy Spirit, He, too, continued to baptize with water (Jn 3:22, 26; 4:1–2; Mt 28:18–20). The sign is still significant; baptism is still necessary. Baptism in water is still the means by which we profess our repentance, and still the means by which God signifies our cleansing. You are not prepared for the second advent of Christ until you have received it.

The Menace of Preparation (3:19–20)

There is one final point that I think bears mentioning. If you are truly going to prepare for the coming of Christ, and what's more, if you are going to help others prepare for the coming of Christ, you can expect opposition. In the course of his ministry of preparation, John called out Herod for committing adultery by taking and marrying his brother Philip's wife. And for that, John landed in prison, and eventually lost his head.

But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he locked John up in prison. (3:19–20)

Mark it down... if you live a life that is prepared to meet Christ, you will be opposed by the world that hates Christ (Jn 15:18–20; 2 Tm 3:12). Therefore, part of your preparation for the second advent of Christ is preparing for the inevitable persecution that comes as a result of being prepared for the second advent of Christ.

“Prepare to Meet Your God, O Israel!”

In the middle of the eighth century BC, the prophet Amos concluded a lengthy prophecy in which the LORD reminds Israel of all the judgments He has poured out upon the nation in order that they might recognize their sin and repent. Five times the LORD recalls judgments from His hand inflicted upon Israel—famine (4:6), drought (4:7–8), blight (4:9), pestilence (4:10), and death (4:11)—and five times He concludes with refrain, “‘Yet you did not return to me,’ declares the LORD.” Finally, in Amos 4:12, the LORD has had enough:

*“Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel;
because I will do this to you,
prepare to meet your God, O Israel!” (Am 4:12)*

This morning, I say the same to you: prepare to meet your God. For Christ is coming, and His winnowing fork is in His hand. Would you be saved on that day? Then you must be prepared in this day. And how shall you prepare to meet your God? There are five essential steps revealed in today’s passage:

1. *Reckon* with the coming wrath (v. 7). God’s fierce, righteous, and infinite wrath is coming, and it is satisfied only by the blood of Christ.
2. *Reject* false hopes of salvation (v. 8). Do not trust in your own righteousness or your religious adherence. Only faith in the mercy of God through the Messiah of God will save.
3. *Repent* and *reform* (vv. 8–14). You cannot worship Christ and yourself; you cannot obey Christ and sin. Only the repentant will be saved, and the sincerity of repentance is borne out by the fruit of repentance.
4. Seek *refuge* in the returning Messiah (vv. 15–17). The only refuge from the wrath of God is in the Christ of God, who alone can baptize in the Spirit of God. Call upon His name today (Rom 10:13).
5. *Receive* baptism (v. 18). Through baptism you visibly come out of the unrepentant world and visibly unite with the repentant people of God.