

"1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY; 3 THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.'" 4 John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. 6 John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey. 7 And he was preaching, and saying, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. 8 "I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." 9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." Mark 1:1-9, NAS95.
JOHN CAME BAPTIZING.

"And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (v.4).

Baptism was a totally radical act. Now we know that proselytes, that is, Gentiles who embraced the Jewish religion were normally ceremonially washed. This symbolized the cleansing away of old heathen beliefs and the embracing of the Lord Jehovah as their God. That baptism didn't make a man in every respect a Jew but the washing was an indispensable ceremonial accompaniment whenever Gentiles entered the Jewish church. So there were some antecedents and roots in certain practices already in existence in Judaism. We also discover in the Old Testament ritual ceremonial washings particularly for the priests and Levites.

What John did was utterly different. The people he baptized were not Gentile converts, they were all circumcised Jews. The people he baptized were not exclusively members of the tribe of Levi, priests and Levites, but people from all over Israel. John took proselyte baptism and insisted that not the heathen but the sons of Abraham themselves must be baptized. John's theme was the forgiveness of sins, and he told these Jews that before this privilege they were no different in this respect than pagans. They needed to undergo a change. They had to be converted. They themselves had to virtually become proselytes. In other words, what had never been done before, John initiated. He insisted that these Jewish people, with all their pride that Abraham was their father, and all their smugness that they weren't Gentile dogs, were being constrained by God's messenger to go through a ritual which outcast strangers from Greece and Rome had to endure. They had

never been asked to do this in their entire history. Jews being baptized? Unheard of! This was why John was called "The Baptizer." There had never been a prophet like him. At this point of forgiveness John told them that their Jewishness was of no consequence at all. Circumcision and being born into the right race and tribe made no difference. They were in the same state, spiritually as any other pagan. What a sense of privilege these Jews possessed. Weren't they in an eternal covenant with Jehovah? They had the law, the Temple, the sacrifices and offerings, the Sabbath and the feast days. They had the oracles of God, and yet John came to them and told them that all that made no difference. It is not, at the point of forgiveness, enough. There has to be more than Jewishness. It was a utterly revolutionary message. The coming of this King was not to bring Utopia to Israel and make a better old covenant. It was to make everything new with and by a New Covenant Person..

Essential baptism for every Jew was like a sleeper having cold water thrown over him. "Wake up! The day is dawning. You must get ready! Out of bed!" What a shock to their system. They were expecting the Messiah to come and he would sound a trumpet and raise an instant army and lead them to triumph over Rome and all their enemies. Instead of this their God sends a prophet who tells them - of all people - to repent and be baptized. John was a thunderous awakening shout, disturbing the dreams of Caiaphas and Annas and King Herod. It shattered the dream of freedom just around the corner when Messiah came. "Get ready for the greatest moment in Jewish history." Hooray! "And get ready by . . . repenting and being baptized!" Repenting? "Come from your slavery to sin into the wilderness. Leave behind your Egypt and head for the kingdom of God because the King is almost here."

John might well say the same thing to us. At the point of the forgiveness of our sins whatever church or family we belong to makes no difference.

Our baptism, our confirmation, our taking communion, papal blessings we have received (whatever they might be), the hands of men in religious costumes placed upon our heads makes no difference. The church we belong to, the piety of those who have surrounded

us, the faultlessness of our doctrine and practice, the blamelessness of our lives all makes no difference. John was standing before the religious pride of his day. He was addressing the chosen race, and he was telling them that they had to enter the great river Jordan just as Naaman the Gentile leper has been plunged under it. They had to repent and be plunged into Jordan. Just as the very heathen became beneficiaries of the covenants and promises of mercy by repenting and submitting to baptism they had to do the same.

Who accepted John's baptism and who rejected it?

We need to look to other gospels for that information.

Those who came to be baptized:

Matthew 3:5; Mark 1:5; John 3:23 - Many people from the surrounding areas

Luke 3:12, 14; 7:29 - Included people who were often despised by the others, for example: Roman soldiers and tax collectors.

Matthew 3:13; Mark 1:9; Luke 3:21 - Jesus also came to be baptized. (Examined in greater detail, later)

Those who refused to be baptized

"12 And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" 13 And he said to them, "Collect no more than what you have been ordered to." 14 Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, "And what about us, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages." 15 Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, 16 John answered and said to them all, "As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 "His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." 18 So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people. 19 But when Herod the tetrarch was reprimanded by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the wicked things which Herod had done, 20 Herod also added this to them all: he locked John up in prison." Luke 3:12-20, NAS95.

"7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8

"Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; 9 and do not suppose that you can 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. 10 "The axe is already laid at the root of the

trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 "As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Matthew 3:7-11, NAS95.

Our Lord Jesus Christ took up the same message when a Jewish teacher of the law came to see him one night. Nicodemus took his religion seriously and he acknowledged that Jesus was a teacher sent from God who did wonderful signs, but immediately Jesus told him, "All that is not enough. Nicodemus, you must be born from above. You must undergo a saving change. You must be plunged into the depths of contrition. You must be washed, renewed and emerge a new creation. Unless you are born of water and the Spirit you cannot enter the kingdom of God." Jesus was saying it into the face of Jewish pride. He says it to all human self-righteousness and the spiritual arrogance and complacency of man. Jesus addresses human morality and tells it to be plunged into the river, the waters of regeneration. Now between Jew and Gentile there is no eternal difference because all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

So John is addressing the most privileged people on the whole planet. He is speaking to the most externally righteous and ethically conscious men and women. He is looking into the eyes of religious attainment and integrity, and he is telling them that they need to enter the river of rebirth. They must know true conversion. They must display radical change in the depths of their being.

Baptism is a baptism of repentance (v.4). In other words, the rite itself is not enough. The ceremony alone will not suffice. Even if it is the holiest messenger sent from the throne of God who is the administrator, and he pronounces the correct formula, the rite itself is not enough to save a man. John didn't have the power to change the heart. It was not enough to be circumcised. It was not enough to be a religious. It was not enough to be baptized. There must be more than that. There must be repentance. "Turn around!" John is saying. "Turn to the Word! Turn to the coming King! Prepare for an open-ended encounter with him! Turn or burn! Right in the very depths of our souls, there, deep in our understanding and emotions and decisions, there has to be a change of mind about our

own journey, our own understanding of life, our attainments, and the moral and spiritual quality of our lives. We have to take decisive action and move to this conclusion that our lives are indefensible. It is all exceedingly personal and individual. When God addresses men and women in his word he includes me, in fact how the rest think and act is unimportant. When he says, "There is none righteous, no not one," then he is speaking those words to me, and he is speaking those words to you, even the most respectable and religious person at any meeting. It becomes a matter of conviction that only the Word and the spirit can bring to the heart of anyone.

John is saying that it will not do simply to have a burst of religious sincerity, go out to the desert, have a good cry, get baptized and go home again. There has to be that change of direction from now on. It begins with a confession of sin that starts deep in one's own heart: "God be merciful to me, the sinner." My life is soiled and needs to be washed. I am emotionally disturbed by how I've lived. I am upset because of my sins. My heart is broken. People may come to me and, "Why on earth are you so sad? You have health, family, a business and many privileges of all kinds and yet your face is so long. Why?" "My sins," I say, "My life is an utter mess. I don't know what I'm living for. Nothing gives me peace. I feel absolutely wretched." "Good," John says. "Those are the ones I am baptizing. Their sin has disturbed them giving them real anguish. They can't sleep and are overwhelmed by their own inadequacy. It's their sins that have driven them to me. Great!" John is saying that the only road to reconciliation with God leads through repentance and conviction of sin. Here are an exercised people who are determined by the strength of the living God to change, and turn right around. That was John's message to the crowds that came out to him, that if they had seen that their biggest problem was their guilt, and their great need was forgiveness then there had to be a turn around, a deep sorrow, a repentance, a change of heart and lifestyle, an abandoning of worldly, sinful and arrogant habits, a total change of every wrong attitude to the lusts of the flesh and the pride of life and a revolution of priorities.

That was John's baptism of repentance, and I wonder if today we might come before the Holy God and take stock of the implications of that, and disabuse our minds of all our

prejudices towards religion, and ask ourselves how is it with us about the gift of forgiveness from God. Have we received it? Do we know with any certainty whether our sins, though they have been like scarlet, are now as white as snow? Have we sought this with anguish of heart until we know we have found it? Let our own repentance be commensurate with a message to us from the living God, with a desert place, and many others longing to be forgiven, with public baptism and acknowledgement that we are sinners.

How John preached this message. I

It was bound by a consciousness that the time was short. Those words on the chapel clock face me every Sunday, "The time is short," they say. John was saying that the King was even now on his way, that they were all living against a deadline, and so there was need of imminent repentance. Hear one of John's sermons. Listen to the urgency and fearless intensity of his preaching: "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them:

'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matt. 3:7-12).

In Mark John speaks of a winnowing fork here of an ax laid at the root. Both are terms signifying judgement. Repent, look to, Messiah. Jesus will preach, repent and believe for the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe or you will only know judgment.

Those words are powerful, but what must it have been like not to read a report - however inspired - but to have been there hearing it? Think of that sermon, not in its summary form, but amplified and applied to the vast multitudes who came there. One

J.C.Ryle wrote about the ministry of Daniel Rowlands in the 18th century in the hamlet of Llangeitho where less than a thousand people live. He says, "Rowlands was made a blessing to hundreds of souls. People used to flock to hear him preach from every part of the Principality of Wales, and to think nothing of traveling fifty or sixty miles on foot for the purpose. On sacrament Sundays it was no uncommon thing for him to have 1500, or 2000, or even 2500 communicants. The people on these occasions would go together in companies, like the Jews going to the temple feast in Jerusalem, and would return home afterwards singing hymns and psalms on their journeys, caring nothing for fatigue" (J.C.Ryle, "Five Christian Leaders of the Eighteenth Century", The Banner of Truth, 1960, London, p.91).

And so it was with the preaching of John, although lasting just for six months. Consider that the prophet John is sent by God, and has been filled with the Spirit of God from his mother's womb. He looks at these people and he tells them that they are living at a moment of national crisis and he tells them what to do. Turn in true repentance - produce fruit to show its real - for that's how you escape the coming wrath. "You tax collectors, God is watching you. Be fair. You must answer to God. You soldiers, God is watching you. Be content with your wages." He spoke of individual sins and he really laid it on them. "Get baptized if you are real." He was utterly fearless and spared no one. "John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done" (Lk. 3:19). That meant the end of John's public ministry. Herod sent his soldiers to arrest John and lock him up in prison.

Have we the grace to stand before the imminence of God in judgment and take stock of our lives? It is not distinctly Christian truth to say that the life of man flies by. That is commonplace. Yet, has it no bearing upon the urgency of repentance? We stand before the coming of God the King, and what are we doing about our sin?

In Shakespeare's King Richard II he says the king says, "I wasted time, and now doth time waste me"? O! call back yesterday, bid time return."

Time is a companion that goes with us on a journey. It reminds us to cherish each moment, because it will never come again. What we leave behind is not as important as how we have lived. Jean Luc Picard

Will Rogers: Half our life is spent trying to find something to do with the time we have rushed through life trying to save.

John was telling these people, "Your inheritance and traditions? What are they? Don't rely on them a moment longer. The King is coming! Repent!"

JOHN CAME PREACHING.

John stood in the wilderness all alone. Only later he gathered disciples around him. His first congregations consisted of thorn bushes, rocks, camels and conies. A voice sounding in a wilderness. God did not send him to speak outside the palaces of the kings and tetrachs, the high priests and consuls but his post was a desert. Then in space-time history something remarkable happened. "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar - when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrach of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene - during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert" (Luke 3:1&2), and there in the desert, where the word of God came to him, he declared it.

It is like that with us today. Something like that has to happen here. The word of God has to come with power and the Holy Spirit and with much assurance. The gospel has to be declared in the power of and a demonstration of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ . There has to be an awakening which can only manifest itself in our being moved and disturbed by the holiness of God and the wretchedness of our own sin. Advertising,promotion and countless programs and self-help lectures in biblical clothing will never awaken the community.

The word of God must come here fresh from the throne of the Grace. We cry for the rushing mighty wind. We cry for the coming of the gentle dove. When He is come the community will come out for this Word.

And until that God ordained day, should it be in our lifetime, we preach like John. Only our message of repentance includes the message of believe, not just be prepared. We are to preach and never falter. We are to preach it because it is the message of the New Covenant Person Jesus Christ. We are to preach it because it is the only way anyone can enter the kingdom of God. We are to preach it for it is a blessing to those hear the voice of the Great Shepherd and a curse to those who do not. We are to preach it because it is the very truth that sets us free if we are genuine believers and not mere professors of faith in Christ.

We are to preach repent and believe because only then can there be a rest that will last forever.

We are to preach it because the nature of the result of the grace that saves us is a violent overthrow of what captivates us for destruction - sin and death. A violent act caused us to be able to be in Christ, that was his torture and his death. Grace is a violent and wonderful thing. It is a destroyer of what destroys us and at the same time it is the thing that is able to re-create us and give us life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Never be afraid to describe grace as a violent thing. It is. If it were not, we would still be dead in our trespasses and our sins. It is so violent that rather than being overwhelmed and in bondage to sin and death we are overwhelmed by a tidal wave of Christ's grace and mercy. Tidal waves are a violent and destructive force in God's economy and yet when we are overcome by the violence of grace, peace everlasting is the result. Even in the created world we recognize the calm after the storm. How much more so when it is the direct result of God's grace in the human soul.