

You Brood of Vipers, Who Warned You to Flee the Coming Wrath

Matthew 3:7-10 and Luke 3:7-14

DIG: What is the difference between John's baptism, Jewish baptism, and believer's baptism. Why did the Pharisees and Sadducees travel from Jerusalem to the Jordan River to see John? Why did Yochanan call them a brood of vipers? What was the coming wrath that Yochanan talked about? What fruit was the baptizer looking for? Who asked what they should do? What was John's response?

REFLECT: Who are today's "Pharisees and Sadducees?" How is repentance linked to your experience of salvation? Have you followed the Lord in believer's baptism?

Matthew records this one sample of the preaching of **John the Baptist**. The parallel account in **Luke** gives more details, but the message is the same: a call to repentance and baptism, an inner change of mind and heart, along with an outward act that symbolized that change - and, even more importantly, a manner of living that *demonstrated* the change.²⁴³

Yochanan was an unforgettable person. His back to **God** movement was creating quite a stir out in the wilderness. Whenever any kind of messianic movement of note took place, the Great Sanhedrin (see Lg - **The Great Sanhedrin**) had a two-fold responsibility to determine if the movement was significant or insignificant. When **Yochanan** began preaching a **baptism** of repentance and drawing huge crowds, it became obvious to the religious leaders in Yerushalayim that this movement needed to be further investigated because some were saying that **John** was the **Messiah**. So the Great Sanhedrin sent representatives to start **the first stage of observation** (see below). You will notice that **John** does all the talking here because **the Pharisees and Sadducees** could only observe.

But then he saw many of the **Pharisees and Sadducees** coming to where he was baptizing (**Matthew 3:7a; Luke 3:7**). The phrase coming to where he was, is in the imperfect tense, and speaks of continuous action. **They** kept coming and kept coming and kept coming. And **immersing** is also in the imperfect tense, **John** kept baptizing, and baptizing and baptizing! But what was the difference between **Yochanan's baptism** and those who were **immersed** after the messianic congregation began in **Acts 2**.

John's baptism was a back to **God** movement looking forward to **the Messiah**. It was kingdom centered and a **baptism** of repentance. The difference between **John's baptism** and proselyte **baptism**, was that **Yochanan** was **baptizing** Jews. It was much different than the Levitical washings. **John's** call for a one-time **immersion** for those who had been born Jews was unprecedented because it said that ancestry was not a guarantee of one's relationship with **ADONAI**. The only one-time washing the Jews performed was for *Gentiles*, signifying their coming as outsiders into the true faith of Judaism. An amazing admission for a Jew. Members of **God's** chosen race, descendants of Abraham, heirs to the covenant of Moshe, came to **Yochanan** to be **immersed** like a *Gentile*.²⁴⁴

Jewish baptism was called proselyte **baptism** for non-Jews. For a *Gentile* to become a Jew there were two requirements: **baptism**, circumcision for the men, and a sacrifice offered by the women. A proselyte by his **immersion** signified that he was terminating his relationship in his old society, including his allegiance to his old gods. The self-administered immersion, was symbolic of a new birth. A proselyte was regarded as risen from the dead. **Yochanan's baptism**, however, was different because it was not self-administered, but also because **he immersed** Jews.²⁴⁵

Believer's baptism identifies the new convert with the death, burial and resurrection of **Jesus Christ (First Corinthians 15:3-4)**. It is an outward manifestation of an inward conviction. That is why those who were **baptized** by **John** had to be **baptized** again after receiving **Messiah**. It has nothing to do with salvation, but was merely a point of obedience. Before **Yeshua** ascended back to heaven **He** commanded: **All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I AM with you always, to the very end of the age (Mattityahu 28:18-20)**.

The Pharisees and Sadducees were not at the Jordan to respond to **John's** message. **They** were there for a different reason. The Sanhedrin had sent them to observe **Yochanan**. Others did not view this **baptism** as some new religious experience, but understood **John's baptism** as one of repentance and preparation for **the Messiah**. **He** was clearly not trying to please the public when **he** cried out: **You brood of vipers (Matthew 3:7b)**! The word for **brood** or *offspring* is the *Greek* word *gennema*. On occasion **Jesus** used the phrase **brood of vipers** to describe **the Pharisees (Matthew 12:34, 23:33)**. **Vipers** were small but extremely poisonous desert snakes that **Yochanan** surely would have been familiar with.

Calling the Pharisees and Sadducees a brood of vipers exposed their hypocrisy, as well as the fact that their wicked works had been passed on to them by the original serpent (Genesis 3:1-13). In Matthew 23:33 Yeshua calls the scribes and Pharisees **snakes** as well as **a brood of vipers**. Later, in John 8:44, the Pharisees challenged Jesus and He said to them: **You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.** Those religious hypocrites were **the devil's** children doing the deceitful bidding of **the Enemy of souls**.²⁴⁶

Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath (Mattityahu 3:7; Luke 3:7)? It's as if Yochanan was saying, "You are like the **snakes** which rush from their lair when the brush catches on fire in the wilderness, as they slither away across the **stones** to their dens." John's preaching was clearly concerned with the means of getting into the messianic community and experiencing its salvation, and therefore, he preached a universal call to **repentance**. While being a pretty straightforward rebuke, it was really no different than the prophets of previous generations had spoken (Psalm 58).

Produce fruit in keeping with repentance (Matthew 3:8; Luke 3:8a). Yochanan even questions their motives for seeking this baptism of repentance since they demonstrated no fruit as evidence of their sincerity. You can't turn to **God** without turning *from* sin. It was as if John was saying, "You have shown absolutely no evidence of **repentance**, but now you have a chance to turn around and go in a different direction. Go ahead and show me that you have turned from your wickedness and I will be more than happy to baptize you." **The rabbis said, "Great is repentance, for it brings healing upon the world. Great is repentance, for it reaches to the throne of God. Some rabbis believed that the Torah was created two thousand years before Adam, but that repentance was created even before the Torah. The rabbis taught that the gates of repentance never close, that repentance is like the sea, because a person can bathe in it at any hour.** The meaning of repentance in Judaism has always been a change of heart, resulting in a closer relationship with ADONAI.

Genuine repentance includes a profound sense of wrongdoing and of sin against HaShem Himself. After committing adultery with Bathsheba and having Uriah killed (Second Sh'mu'el 11), David cried out: **Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in Your sight (Psalm 51).** Not only did he see his sin, but he was also desperate to rid himself of it. In another Psalm he declared: **When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long (Psalm 32:3).** The sorrow of real repentance is like David's; it is sorrow for sinning against HaShem, not simply because we have to suffer the consequences

of our actions. That is merely selfish regret and only adds to the initial sin. Spiritual **fruit** is the evidence of true **repentance**. Of all the people who should have known the meaning of true **repentance** it was the **Pharisees and Sadducees**, but sadly, **they** did not.

John anticipated **their** response that depended on **their** supposed superior relationship with **Abraham**. The Jews believed that the wrath of **God** would only be poured out on the Gentiles, while **they**, as **Abraham's** children, were certain of escape. **In the words of the Talmud, that the night of Isaiah 21:12 was only to the [Gentile] nations of the world, but the morning was promised to Isra'el (Jer. Ta'anit 64a).** They believed that all Jews, by virtue of **their** special connection to righteous **Abraham**, enjoyed the benefits of a superior standing before **ADONAI**. So **John** began by saying: **And do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father" (Mattityahu 3:9a).** **This common doctrine is often found in the prayer service and rabbinic writings; the Avot section of the Amidah prayer for example. The Talmud even declares "all Isra'el has a place in the world to come (cf. Tractate Sanhedrin 10:1).** The reason the members of the Great Sanhedrin would **say** this silently to **themselves**, was because it was **the first stage of observation** and **they** were not able to engage in any conversation with **John**.

In response to **their** hypothetical argument that **they** had a special relationship with **Abraham**, **Yochanan** issues a stinging rebuke. Possibly pointing to the **stones** on the river bank, he said: **For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham (Matthew 3:9b; Luke 3:8b).** From stonyhearted Gentiles **He** would make spiritual children of **Abraham**. **The Pharisees and Sadducees** needed to learn that one is a son of **Abraham** of the heart only. Rabbi Shaul would later write: **A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code (Romans 2:28-29).** Aside from the truth of this statement, there is clearly a classic play on words in the Hebrew text as well. The Hebrew for **children**, or *banim*, would closely relate to the word for **stones**, or *avanim*, thus reinforcing the problem of trusting only in the merits of the fathers.²⁴⁷

One strong image of judgment succeeds another. The urgency of **Yochanan** saying that the Kingdom had **already come (Matthew 3:2)**, matches the claim here that **the ax is already at the root of the trees (Mattityahu 3:10a; Luke 3:9a).** The looming judgment is stressed not only by the initial verb **already**, but also by the vivid present tenses of this verse. For the chopping down of a **tree** is a metaphor for **God's** judgment on Gentile nations (**Isaiah 10:33; Ezekiel 31:1-18; Daniel 4:14**). Now Isra'el, too, faces such judgment. Later, **Yeshua** will take up the metaphor with specific reference to the failure to produce

fruit. **Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them** (Matthew 7:19; Luke 13:6-9). And every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire (Mt 3:10b; Luke 3:9b). The cutting at the root indicated a final removal of the tree rather than merely pruning. As a result, the basis of Israel's judgment is not a failure to be children of Abraham, but the lack of **good fruit**, which is the evidence of true repentance.²⁴⁸

After observing, they would then report their conclusion back to the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. If the movement were found to be insignificant, then the whole thing would be dropped. But if the first stage was found to be significant, the Sanhedrin proceeded to the second stage of interrogation. Then they asked questions, like: Who are you? Who do you claim to be? What are you doing? Why are you doing it?²⁴⁹

"What should we do then?" the crowd asked. Such a question does not suggest that those seeking to have a relationship with God based on their works, but is an appropriate, sincere response to the Good News. **Yochanan answered them, "The person who has two tunics must share with the person who has none."** The tunic was an under-garment worn over the bare body and beneath an outer robe. A person might wear two tunics for protection against cold on a journey. **And the person who has food must do likewise (Luke 3:10-11 NET Bible).** These verses clearly have their roots in the TaNaKh (**Job 31:16-20; Isaiah 58:7; Ezekiel 18:7**). Any genuine faith must involve concern for the poor and unfortunate, and all of the Gospel writers, Luke in particular, sought to stress this point (**Luke 6:30, 12:33, 14:12-14, 16:9 and 18:22**).

Even tax collectors came to be baptized. Tax collectors were known for their greediness. They were located at commercial centers, such as Capernaum and Jericho, to collect tolls, customs and tariffs. Such people had bid and won the right to collect such tolls for the Romans. The fact that their profit was determined by how much they collected and that their bid had been paid for in advance led to great abuse. They were hated and despised by their fellow Jews. Dishonesty among tax collectors was the rule (*Sanhedrin* 25b), and their witness was not accepted in a court of law. Thus they were often associated with sinners and prostitutes. **Rabbi, they asked: what should we do? He told them: Don't collect any more than you are required to (Luke 3:12-13).**

Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied: Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely - be content with your pay (Luke 3:14). These soldiers were probably not Romans but Jews whom Herod Antipas employed (**Josephus, Antiquities 18.5.1 [18.113]**), perhaps to assist the tax collectors with their duties in

Peraea. These **soldiers** were not required to resign but to avoid the sins of their profession, like violent intimidation, **extortion** and dissatisfaction with their **pay**.²⁵⁰

This is a very practical message that **John** gave to us and to people who came to **him** from different walks of life. Grow where you are planted. If you are a parent, reveal that you are a believer by the way you parent. If you are in business, show that you're a believer by the ethical way you conduct your business. If you are waitress, make public the fact that you love the **God** of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob by the way you interact with other employees and customers. You expose what you are. **Thus**, our **Lord** said: **By their fruit you will recognize them** (Matthew 7:20).