

Prepared

Jesus is the promised Messiah who brings judgment.

LUKE 3:7-18



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Why would people ignore clear warning signs? How can a warning sign also be a path to safety?

Bob Ebeling and four other colleagues sounded a warning note on January 27, 1986. As one of the engineers on the space shuttle Challenger, Ebeling and his colleagues came to the conviction that the temperature would lead to an explosion. Those above him ignored the warnings and proceeded with the ill-fated launch. Most of us have ignored warning signs too. John the Baptist sounded the warning call; some heeded his warning, and others ignored it.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

John the Baptist appeared in the infancy narratives as the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5-25,57-80). The news of a miraculous birth to barren parents first came to Zechariah when he was serving in the temple (1:1-17). The angel who appeared to Zechariah told him that this child would go before the Messiah “in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to make ready for the Lord a prepared people” (1:17). John would go before the Messiah and would be called a “prophet of the Most High” who would “go before the Lord to prepare his ways” (1:76). The infancy stories of John ended with this assessment: “The child grew up and became spiritually strong, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel” (1:80). Not much is mentioned about John until the time of his public ministry.

Because Zechariah and Elizabeth were already old when John was born, they probably did not live very long after his birth. Perhaps this explains why he did not follow his father into the priesthood. Regardless of the reason, John went to the desert between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea, where prophets like Elijah (1 Kings 19:4-8) and Amos (Amos 1:1) had experienced the power of God. He dressed in camel’s hair and ate locusts and wild honey (Matt. 3:4). He identified with the prophet Elijah, whom Malachi predicted would come announcing the arrival of the Messiah (Mal. 4:5). John the Baptist was an outcast, foreign to the normal priesthood and temple officers of his day, and yet those people were among the group who came to hear his preaching in the desert (Matt. 3:7). He issued a warning that would either bring blessing or judgment.

LUKE 3:7-18

7 He then said to the crowds who came out to be **baptized**^A by him, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? **8** Therefore produce fruit consistent with repentance. And don’t start saying to yourselves, ‘We have **Abraham**^B as our father,’ for I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. **9** The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be cut down and **thrown into the fire**^C.” **10** “What then should we do?” the crowds were asking him. **11** He replied to them, “The one who has two shirts must share with someone who has none, and the one who has food must do the same.” **12** Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” **13** He told them, “Don’t collect any more than what you have been **authorized**^D.” **14** Some soldiers also questioned him, “What should we do?” He said to them, “Don’t take money from anyone by force or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.” **15** Now the people were waiting expectantly, and all of them were questioning in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah. **16** John answered them all, “I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I am is coming. **I am not worthy**^E to untie the strap of his sandals. He will **baptize you**^F with the Holy Spirit and fire. **17** His winnowing shovel is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with **fire that never goes out**^G.” **18** Then, along with many other exhortations, he proclaimed good news to the people.

Passage Outline

- Warning (Luke 3:7-9)
- Response (Luke 3:10-14)
- Division (Luke 3:15-18)

Key Words

- A. Acts 19:4 says, “John baptized with ... repentance, telling the people that they should believe in the one who would come after him ... Jesus.”
- B. Even Abraham was justified by faith expressed through action (Jas. 2:21).
- C. Jesus used this same image in His own teaching and preaching (Matt. 7:19; Luke 13:6-9).
- D. Tax collectors were notorious for collecting more than the legal amount and getting rich off the rest.
- E. John was exceedingly humble (Matt. 3:14; John 3:30).
- F. Jesus performed some water baptisms (John 3:22), but His disciples received the Holy Spirit from Him (John 20:22) and again at Pentecost (Acts 2).
- G. A reference to eternal judgment (Mark 9:48).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

John the Baptist's life was without note since Luke 1:80. When the time for Jesus' ministry drew near, God sent word to John. He began proclaiming that he was the fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3-5 and that the Messiah was coming to bring salvation (Luke 3:1-6). This caused *the crowds* to come hear him preach in the wilderness and *to be baptized by him*.

How does the way John addressed the crowd point to their need for repentance?

KEY DOCTRINE: Salvation

(Repentance) Repentance is a genuine turning from sin toward God (2 Chron. 7:14).

John encouraged the multitude to *produce fruit consistent with repentance*. Repentance involves turning from sin and to God. True repentance produces *fruit* that indicates the sincerity of that repentance.

What religious works do people trust to save them in place of faith in Christ and repentance from sin?

BIBLE SKILL: Use a concordance and/or Bible dictionary to

learn more about baptism. Read entries about baptism in a Bible dictionary. A good resource is the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary. What was the difference between Jewish baptism of converts, John's baptism for repentance, and the church's baptism? How would you explain the importance of believer's baptism?

John's message created questions in the minds of those in the crowd. John's answer in verse 11 did not suggest a person should seek a relationship with God on the basis of doing good works; rather, John answered with examples of the kind of fruit that is in keeping with repentance.

Should compassion for the poor be a test for genuine repentance? Explain.

A second group of people who questioned John were *tax collectors*. They were considered dishonest traitors who worked for Rome and cheated the Jewish people. Tax collectors would often gain wealth by collecting more than people owed and paying only the minimum to the Roman government. The third group of people who questioned John were *soldiers*. Like the tax collectors, soldiers did not have a good reputation among the Jews. They were known to use their authority to loot, bully, and take whatever they wanted.

DID YOU KNOW? Because of their reputation of being dishonest, the testimony of a tax collector was not permitted in a court of law.

Why should warnings also be couched in the good news of the gospel? Why should the good news of the gospel also include warnings?

Messianic fever was at a high pitch, and the people wondered if such a powerful and eccentric messenger might be the Messiah they had longed to see. John made it clear he was not the Messiah.

APPLY THE TEXT

- Judgment awaits those who live in disobedience to God and His standards.
- Repentance is demonstrated through godly living.
- One's eternal destiny is determined by his or her response to Jesus.

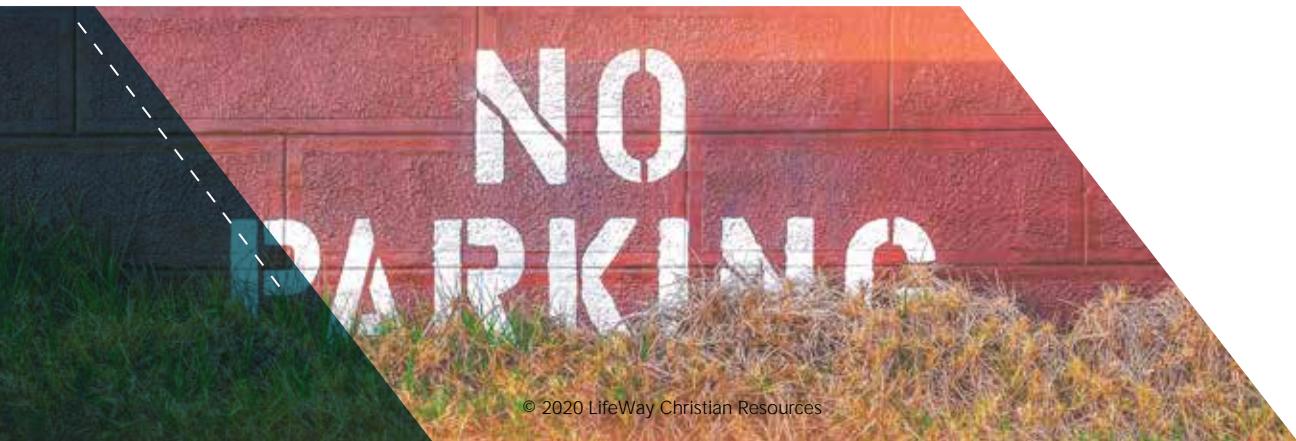
Who do you know that needs to be warned about God's judgment on sin?

What lessons can you share with them from today's lesson that will challenge them to heed the warning?

As a group, how can you demonstrate true repentance and love for God by loving others? What are some specific things you could do to help those who are in need?

How would you answer those who claim that the Christian faith is intolerant and close-minded when it comes to other faiths?

Prayer Requests



DAILY EXPLORATION

Day 1: Baptism follows repentance.

Read Luke 3:7, considering John's words.

John's opening address to the crowd demonstrates the intensity of his message. He called them a brood of vipers. Numerous types of poisonous snakes were indigenous to Israel; their venom affected the respiratory system and destroyed the red blood cells. Jesus would use the same words for the Pharisees (Matt. 23:33). Like the serpent of old who deceived Adam and Eve, these Jewish leaders were causing others to stray under the guise of their own righteousness.

John's question—*Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?*—was an indictment of those who came to be baptized but had not repented of their sin. They thought they were fleeing the wrath of God through John's baptism, but his baptism was a baptism indicating repentance (Luke 3:8). John certainly had not taught them that the act of baptism would automatically avert God's wrath upon their sin. He warned them that an outward ritual could not cover an inward decay.

How does the way John addressed the crowd point to their need for repentance?

Day 2: Religious works alone cannot save you.

Read Luke 3:8-9, identifying the warning John is giving.

Some Jews might have claimed they had no need for conversion or baptism because they had *Abraham* as their *father*. Yet their lineage from Abraham did not negate their need for genuine faith. Abraham himself was saved by faith, not works (Rom. 4:3). Those whose hearts were not trusting in God could not counter their lack of faith by baptism. John declared that God could create a new family of Abraham from the multitude of rocks in the wilderness. His point was that the claim of Jewish lineage meant nothing if a person lacked genuine faith. This would not have been a popular message among some of the Jews who had traveled such a long distance to hear John's message and to be baptized by him. With a word of intense warning, John told his listeners that *the ax is already at the root of the trees*. Clearly this meant God's judgment was near. They could not claim their Jewish heritage as a means of salvation. They would need to repent of their sin and turn to Christ, whom John would point to as the Messiah. John reminded his listeners that every tree must *produce good fruit*. Just because a tree grew in the vineyard of Israel did not mean that it was safe from judgment. Those who had not repented and produced good fruit would be *thrown into the fire*. This was a strong warning. Only by genuine repentance, evidenced by good fruit in their lives, would they avoid God's judgment.

What religious works have you trusted in the past to save you in place of faith in Christ and repentance from sin?

Day 3: Genuine followers of Christ preach the gospel and show compassion.

Read Luke 3:10-11, noticing John's call to compassion.

The crowds asked: *What then shall we do?* Their question was followed by questions from tax collectors (v. 12) and soldiers (v. 14). The crowds at Pentecost would ask the same question after Peter's sermon (Acts 2:37). John's answer in verse 11 did not suggest a person should seek a relationship with God on the basis of doing good works; rather, John answered with examples of the kind of fruit that is in keeping with repentance. (See v. 8.) These are not what people must do to be saved but what happens once they have repented and turned to Christ. John's reply was that the one who had *two shirts must share with someone who has none*. This shirt was a tunic, the inner garment worn under a cloak. Job also had identified compassion for the poor as a sign of a right relationship with God (Job 31:16-20). Isaiah had denounced any religious activity that ignored clothing the naked and feeding the hungry (Isa. 58:7). Ezekiel had identified true righteousness as feeding the hungry and clothing the naked (Ezek. 18:7). John's idea of practical righteousness following personal holiness had long roots in the Old Testament prophets. The law was summed up with two commands: loving God and people (Matt. 22:37-39). Genuine followers of Christ do not choose between preaching the gospel or showing compassion to the poor; they do both.

If your repenting was evaluated by your compassion, where would you stand?

Day 4: True repentance is reflected in our actions.

Read Luke 3:12-14, contemplating actions that show true repentance.

A second group of people who questioned John were *tax collectors*. Tax collectors would often gain wealth by collecting more than people owed and paying only the minimum to the Roman government. John did not tell them to resign from their position but to start doing their job honestly. They were not to bully people by forcing them to give more than they owed or by collecting more than they needed and pocketing the extra. Those greedy actions would give evidence they had not repented. The third group of people who questioned John were *soldiers*. John's answer to the soldiers was twofold. John told them not to abuse their power by taking advantage of the people they were assigned to protect. Second, he told them to *be satisfied* with their wages. The soldiers were to work honestly and be satisfied with their pay without supplementing it through dishonest means.

What actions today show that a person is truly repentant?

Day 5: Those who do not believe will face judgment.

Read Luke 3:15-18, noting the warnings expressed.

John made it clear he was not the Messiah. Furthermore, John baptized with *water*, but when Messiah came He would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. The context of *fire* in this passage indicates it was connected to judgment (Luke 3:9). John's audience included those who would believe and those who would not believe. Therefore, some would receive the Holy Spirit when they believed in the Messiah and others would face the fire of judgment because of their unbelief. John explained that the Messiah would come with a *winnowing shovel* in His hand. John explained this imagery, emphasizing that with the fork the Messiah would *clear his threshing floor*. The wheat would be placed safely in the barn, but the chaff would be burned in the *fire that never goes out*. This was a reference to the eternal lake of fire (Rev. 20:10,14-15). Because the Messiah had come, these warnings were not intended to frighten but to motivate people to turn from their sin and turn to the Messiah.

Why should the good news of the gospel also include warnings?

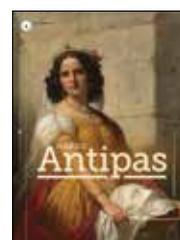
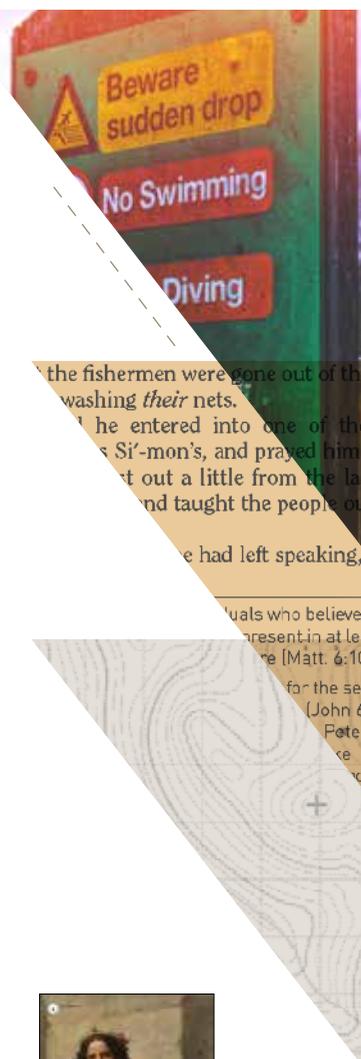
TALK IT OUT

Reflect on the truths found in Luke 3, sharing with other members of your Bible study group.

What's good in John's bold, direct style of communication? Why would certain people need to hear these words?

When are God's answers personalized to individuals?

How did John's baptism differ from Jesus' baptism? What might this fire be? Why then, did John baptize?



For additional context, read “Herod Antipas” and “Insites: Herod the Great” in the Winter 2020-21 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.