

The Greatest Life Ever Lived

A Study in the Incarnate Life of Jesus Christ and An Exposition of the Four Gospels

LESSON XVIII : THE BEGINNING OF JOHN THE BAPTIST'S MINISTRY

Matthew	Mark	Luke	John	related passages
3:1-10	1:1-6	3:1-14		Isa 40:1-5; Mal 3:1-3

Lesson Overview

- Approximately eighteen years have passed since we last saw Jesus in Jerusalem. Little is known of that time and the general assumption is that Jesus quietly lived in subjection to His parents in Nazareth. From this point on Joseph is missing, making for another assumption that he died during “the hidden years.”
- At what appears to be the official beginning of the ministry of the Messiah, the forerunner cries for the people to prepare their hearts through repentance. Water baptism is provided for those showing forth fruits of a true conversion.

The Introduction of John the Baptizer's Public Ministry

Mk 1:1 *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God;*

Lk 3:1,2 *Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being Tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip Tetrarch of Ituraea and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the Tetrarch of Abilene, Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests, the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness.*

This is the first time we have been in the gospel according to Mark. Matthew began his work with the genealogy / announcement to Joseph concerning the birth of Christ; Luke began his work with the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist then continued with the infancy narratives concerning Christ; and John began his work with a prologue of the deity of Jesus Christ. Mark portrays Christ as an active, energetic, swiftly moving, warring, conquering King. Mark therefore begins his gospel with the herald that prepares the way for the king.

Mark's words *the beginning of the gospel of Jesus* is probably not connected with the title of the gospel as a whole:

- if the title of the entire gospel, it would have been more natural to say “The gospel of Jesus Christ” instead of “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ”
- note verse two flows naturally with this verse, tying the two verses together
- Mark is typically designated “Peter’s interpreter,” and it’s interesting that when Peter was dealing with Cornelius concerning the gospel, he *began* with John the Baptist (Acts 10:37)
- Luke’s gospel as well goes into great detail, not of when Jesus appeared but John, marking a definite revival of prophecy. Note the phrase *and the word of God came unto John*, a common manner of designating how the OT prophets received their message, placing John among the prophets.
- Jesus Himself places the beginning of this new era with John the Baptist (Lk 16:16)

The sense of these verses therefore is “*The good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, began with John the Baptist. It was John who, as predicted, prepared the way for Christ’s coming.*”

Note Luke’s elaborate description of the time, as if a conscious intent to supply a want. As Augustus died August 19, 14 AD, the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar was August AD 28 - August AD 29. An alternate understanding of this is that the starting point mentioned here is that of Tiberius’ co-regency with Augustus, AD 11-12. Others use the Syrian dating system whereby the year begins Oct 1, making this AD 27. If using the Jewish system when the year begins with the first of Nissan (March / April) then this would be AD 28. Regardless of what we use, it seems the best we can get is 27-29 AD.

Secular background:

- **Pilate** was governor of the Roman province of Judaea from AD 26 - 36, being the fifth in the series of governors. The word for governor is quite general, and an inscription has been found using the title Prefect.
- **Herod** is Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great that assumed this office upon his father’s death until AD 39.
- **Philip** was Herod’s brother and ruled in NE of the Sea of Galilee from Herod the Great’s death until AD 33 / 34.
- **Lysanias** is uncertain. Josephus mentions a Lysanias who ruled extensive territory from his capital Chalcis until his death in AD 36 BC. While some have therefore thought Luke to be mistaken, another Lysanias has been found among

inscriptions who would be a contemporary of the Herods. Undoubtedly this is the one of Luke's reference.

Religious background:

“The various foreign rulers that dominated Palestine - the Ptolemies, the Seleucidae, the Herods, and later the Romans - were generally regarded by the Jewish people as usurpers whose rule had to be tolerated but who were never the rightful sovereigns. The people may have had to submit to their political yoke, but they never gave to them hearty allegiance. The real controlling power of the Jewish mind was the priesthood.” [Tenney, *NT Survey*]

Annas was high priest AD 6-15 when the Roman governor Gratus deposed him. Five of his sons later served as high priests and **Caiaphas** (holding the office AD 18-36) was his son-in-law. Luke literally says *in the high priesthood* (singular) which is unusual when linked with two names. Luke knew that officially there was only one High Priest, but his possible meaning is that while Caiaphas was the official high priest, the true power was Annas and was perhaps even regarded by the Jews as the true high priest (Acts 4:6). Note when Jesus was arrested He was first taken to Annas (John 18:13).

Matt 3:1,2 *In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, and saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*

Mk 1:4 *John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.*

Lk 3:3 *And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins;*

Matthew calls him *John the Baptist*, Mark calls him *John the Baptizer*, and Luke calls him *John the son of Zacharias*. It is interesting to note that John was so well known as “John the Baptist” that even the non-biblical writer Josephus refers to him by this name.

Matthew states *in those days* connecting his narrative concerning John with the preceding infancy narratives. The sense is not that they follow immediately one upon the other, but rather Matthew is saying “while Jesus lived in Nazareth John the Baptist appeared.”

The wilderness of Judea is described as “the rolling bad lands between the hill country of Judea to the west, the Dead Sea and lower Jordan to the east, stretching northward to about the point where the Jabbok flows into the Jordan. It is indeed a desolation, a vast undulating expanse of barren chalky soil covered with pebbles, broken stones and rocks. Here and there a bit of brushwood appears, with snakes crawling underneath.” [Hendriksen, *Mark*] Not absolute barrenness but territory not appropriate for shepherds and their flocks. “*And he came into all the country about Jordan*” implies John travelled about the entire Jordan valley.

Preaching = Gk *kāruσσōn* which Wuest translates “*making a public proclamation with that formality, gravity, and authority which must be heeded and obeyed.*” The most common word for preaching found in the NT.

A proper analysis of **baptism** would require several lessons in itself (which is a temptation). Sufficient for now will be a few critical points:

- **The English word baptism is not a translation but rather a transliteration** of the Greek word being used. A *translation* brings the *meaning* of a word or phrase from one language into another while a *transliteration* is simply bringing the word in the original directly into another language, letter for letter. An example of both may be found in this lesson: in the note above concerning preaching, the *transliteration* of the Greek word is given (“Gk *kāruσσōn*”) which is immediately followed with the *translation* or meaning of that word (“making a public proclamation with that formality, gravity, and authority which must be heeded and obeyed”). The Greek words being used in these verses are forms of the word *baptizō* (which is transliterated into the English language as baptism) and the meaning (the translation) of the Greek word is *immersion*. Due to church controversy when the KJV was translated, King James set guidelines of which one was to not translate this word but only transliterate the word into English. As I understand this, the reason for the guideline was because he had never been immersed in water for his baptism. Another reason could very well be that he wanted to avoid church controversy and this allowed each church to place its own application to their rite.
- **Baptism is a religious ceremony involving the participant to be immersed into water.** The Greek word means *immersion*, coming from a root word which means *to dip*. It is so used in Lk 11:38 for the washing of hands prior to eating, meaning immersing the hands into water for cleansing. It was used by the Greeks for the dyeing of a garment, the drawing of water by dipping a vessel into another, and the drawing of wine by dipping the cup into the bowl, among other uses. It is used in 2 Kings 5:14 (LXX) of Naaman dipping himself in the river for cleansing. Curiously enough, Wuest (who's not a Baptist if I'm correct) translates the word *and they were being immersed in the Jordan river*.
- **Baptism is a testimony** in the fact that the believer is testifying to the world externally what has happened inwardly spiritually (note below, *remission of sins* and Rom 6:1-4). As one who has trusted Christ has died to the old life, is buried with Christ and raised to walk in new life inwardly in their hearts, so the act of baptism pictures this transaction.
- **Baptism is an act of identification** in which the believer publicly aligns his allegiance with Jesus his new Sovereign. The new convert is confessing “I belong to Him and He is now my Master. I will follow Him, I will obey Him.” During the NT era, it *cost* something to follow Christ and baptism was not taken lightly. The whole point of the book of Hebrews

was to encourage Jewish believers to stay firm to the faith they once professed. Turning to Jesus often cost them their families, jobs and sometimes their lives. This has been lost in today's culture of false professions and easy believism with the church being often no more than another club in which one must be baptized to become a member. Disobedience and rebellion to the Word of God is accepted as a normal part of Christian growth which is totally foreign to scriptures.

• There was quite probably **Jewish proselyte baptism** which preceded John's baptism and we should not be ignorant of that fact. Each of the sources I used fell into one of the following categories:

proselyte baptism was doubtful to have even existed

proselyte baptism probably existed but we're not sure when

proselyte baptism was a definite ritual among Jews and possibly other pagan religions

Almost without exception all my sources admitted the historical fact of proselyte baptism. Most took the middle position while a few were so bold to claim it was a definite historical fact. "What John preached, that he also symbolised by a rite which, though not in itself, yet in its application, was wholly new. Hitherto the Law had it, that those who had contracted Levitical defilement were to immerse before offering sacrifice. Again, it was prescribed that such Gentiles as became 'proselytes of righteousness,' or 'proselytes of the Covenant,' were to be admitted to full participation in the privileges of Israel by the threefold rites of circumcision, baptism, and sacrifice - the immersion being, as it were, the acknowledgment and symbolic removal of moral defilement, corresponding to that of Levitical uncleanness. But never before had it been proposed that Israel should undergo a 'baptism of repentance,' although there are indications of a deeper insight into the meaning of Levitical baptisms." [Edersheim, *Life of Messiah*] "Baptism was a rite of cleansing in a number of religions. It seems certain that at this time the Jews used proselyte baptism. They regarded all Gentiles as unclean, so baptized them when they became proselytes (as well as circumcising the males). The sting in John's practice was that he applied to Jews the ceremony regarded as suitable for unclean Gentiles. Many Jews expected that in the judgement God would deal hardly with Gentile sinners, but that the Jews, the descendants of Abraham, the friend of God, would be safe. John denounces this attitude and removes the fancied security." [Morris, *Luke*] An argument for the Jewish ritual preceding John's is that it is easier to accept John using a common practice of the time under the leadership of the Lord than it is to accept that the Jews later accepted what had become an accepted Christian practice (compare the synagogue / local church similarities).

Repentance in its most simple form means *a change of mind*. "Metanoia (repentance) is ... primarily an *after-thought, different from the former thought*; then, a *change of mind* which issues in *regret* and in *change of conduct*. [Vincent, *Word Studies*, italics his] Wuest: "*be having a change of mind which issues in regret and a change of conduct...*" Repentance is the flip side of a coin in which the other side is *conversion*. Conversion is a change, man turning from self to God. Repentance coincides with conversion, in which a sinner changes his mind concerning self, sin, and the Lord. One cannot have true repentance without conversion, and vice-versa. One describes the negative: a turning away from something (repentance), the other describes the positive: a turning to something (or rather Someone, conversion).

Remission of sins = forgiveness, sending away of sins. Pictures of this throughout the OT include the scape goat (Lev 16), the Lord removing our sins as far as the east from the west (Ps 103:12), a washing of our sins, turning what was red as scarlet becoming white as snow (Isa 1:18), a blotting out of our iniquity (Isa 44:22), and a pardoning of our sins (Isa 55:6,7; Mic 7:18). Eternal life with God is impossible without this remission / forgiveness of sins through the shed blood of Jesus.

Note baptism is separated from the remission of sins. **One is not baptized to have their sins forgiven, one is baptized because their sins have already been forgiven.** Wuest on Mt 3:11: "*I indeed immerse you in water because of repentance.*" Wuest on Mk 1:4: "*a baptism which had to do with a change of mind relative to the previous life an individual lived, this baptism being in view of the fact that sins are put away*"

Kingdom of heaven (literally "*the kingdom of the heavens*") is unique to Matthew while the other gospel writers use *the kingdom of God*. Matthew writing to Jews avoided using the name of God and therefore used this phrase in its stead. "In fact, the word 'heaven' was very often used instead of 'God,' so as to avoid unduly familiarising the ear with the Sacred Name.... A review of many passages on the subject shows that, in the Jewish mind the expression 'Kingdom of Heaven' referred, not so much to any particular period, as in general to *the Rule of God* - as acknowledged, manifested, and eventually perfected." [Edersheim, *Life of Messiah*] Tasker: the phrase is used to refer to "kingly rule" more than the sphere in which that rule is exercised. "It is a kingdom of heaven because its origin, its end, its king, the character and destiny of its subjects, its laws, institutions, and privileges - all are heavenly." [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

Mat 3:3 For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.

Mk 1:2,3 as it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send My messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.

Lk 3:4-6 as it is written in the book of the words of Esaias the prophet, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make His paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

The three synoptic Gospels coincide here with a quote identifying the prophetic significance of John the Baptist. Matthew and Mark quote Isaiah 40:3 while Luke adds Isaiah 40:4,5. Mark also begins his quote with Mal 3:1, Malachi's quote as the Lord saying He will send a messenger, then Isaiah's quote to identify that messenger as John the Baptist. There is a difference between the major Bible versions concerning Mark's quote at this point: KJV says "as it is written in the prophets" and many newer translations say "as it is written in Isaiah the prophet." Either is an acceptable rendering. That the KJV reading is allowable is obvious since Mark does quote from two different prophets. But that several prophecies are used when referencing only one is not an error nor unique to Mark: that Matthew did the same is the probable solution to the quote in Mat 27:9,10 as being from both Jeremiah and Zechariah while only Jeremiah is mentioned. An example may be found in the OT as well: 2 Chron 36:21 is a quote from Lev 26:34,35 and Jer 25:12; 29:10 but only Jeremiah is mentioned. If Mark chose to reference only the source of the primary quote is not an error.

Isaiah's passage is a picture of Jehovah as He leads the Jews back into the land after the captivity. As He approached there had to be a way prepared for the Lord's coming in the Syrian desert between Babylon and Jerusalem, a practice not unheard of in the orient. A herald comes announcing the soon arrival of the king and the people of the land do road work to provide smooth passage. This is applied in the NT to John as Christ's herald. That this is proper is supported by John's interpretation of his position (John 1:23) as well as the words of Christ Himself (Mt 11:10). "These words originally formed part of the consoling message given to the Babylonian exiles. They were soon to return to their own land under the guidance and protection of their God and in that divinely ordered change in Israel's fortunes God would be seen to be reigning. The way back to Jerusalem was the king's highway. John, the last of the prophets of Israel, was now commissioned to utter a similar and even more wonderful 'gospel' message. The reign of God was immediately to be made manifest in Israel in all its fullness in the Person and the work of none other than the Messiah Himself. For that great coming men must prepare a way in their hearts." [Tasker, *Matthew*] John's work however was not the physical roads which needed repair but rather the wilderness within men's hearts. The message of the herald was enhanced by the desertland in which the message came.

As common with OT prophecies, there is little or no distinction made between the first and second coming of Christ, and in Malachi the second coming is prevalent. The messenger sent by God however first prepares the hearts of the people spiritually and Mark legitimately applies this to Jesus' first coming. Note as well that Luke used Malachi in reference to John when the angel appeared to Zacharias in the temple (Lk 1:17; see lesson 9).

A side note of interest in support of the trinity / deity of Jesus: note the transition between Jehovah in the OT to Jesus in the NT. The gospel writers have no problem making this application.

Note it is Luke alone that mentions "all flesh shall see the salvation of God," keeping with his universality of the gospel.

Matt 3:4 And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey.

Mk 1:6 And John was clothed with camel's hair, and with a girdle of a skin about his loins; and he did eat locusts and wild honey;

A brief description of John is given. We may assume that what is given is not a complete summary of John. The main point of his simple life is that he was a living protest against selfishness and self-indulgence which fills the empty existence of so many who are carelessly rushing to their doom. "Remarkable by his appearance, his message, and his moral intensity, John made a great impression." [Bruce, *Gk NT*] Plummer (quoted in Morris, *Luke*) says "The whole man was a sermon."

- **raiment of camel's hair** was a long flowing garment woven from camel's hair (not the skin of a camel but the woven hair), somewhat reminiscent of Elijah's mantle. One author points out the rugged apparel may have been regarded as symbolic of the prophetic office (cp Zech 13:4). That true or not, the rough garment was suitable for desert wear: durable and economical. Jesus made a point of mentioning that John was not one to wear fine apparel (Mat 11:8).
- **leather belt** fastened at the waist was multi-purpose: it kept the loose robe from blowing loose and tearing, but also allowed the robe to be tucked in for easier walking (cp "gird up the loins of our minds" - 1 Pet 1:13).
- **wild honey and locusts**, that which the desert supplied. The honey served not only as a sweetener but as food itself, and was easily found in the wilderness between rocks, etc. "Opinion is divided between *bee* honey and *tree* honey, i.e., honey made by wild bees in trees or holes in the rocks, or a liquid exuding from palms and fig trees. Both were used as food, but our decision should incline to vegetable honey, on the simple ground that it was the poorer food. Bee honey was a delicacy, and is associated with milk in Scripture in descriptions of a fertile land. The vegetable product would suit best John's taste and state." [Bruce, *Gk NT*]

Locusts were permitted by the Lord to eat under the Mosaic economy (Lev 11:22) and was used by the poor. One author is quoted as saying, "The Bedouins of Arabia and of East Jordan land eat many locusts, roasted, boiled or baked in cakes. In Arabia they are sold in the market. They taste not badly." [Benzinger, quoted in Bruce, *Gk NT*] "And why not? The Latin saying, "De gustibus non disputandum est" ("One should not argue about taste") still holds. Those who enjoy shrimp, mussel, oyster, and frog legs should not find fault with those who eat the locust." [Hendriksen, *Mark*]

Matt 3:5,6 Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, and were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.

Mk 1:5 And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins.

Multitudes came out to see this man, which was one of John's mission: prepare the hearts of the people for the Messiah. He was no recluse or hermit, another indication that John did not belong to the Qumran community spoken of in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The entire area, not only Judea which would include Jerusalem, but even those on the other side of the Jordan travelled to John (Matthew's account).

"But there was explicit confession, frank, full, on the part of guilt-burdened men and women glad to get relief so. General or special confession? Probably both: now one, now the other, according to idiosyncrasy and mood. Confession was not exacted as a necessary condition of baptism, but voluntary. The participle means, while confessing; not, provided they confessed." [Bruce, *Gk NT*] This confession was public, not private to John only.

Matt 3:7,8 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth fruits meet for repentance:

Lk 3:7,8a Then said he to the multitude that came forth to be baptized of him, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance,

The usual interpretation is that the Jewish leaders are "drawn doubtless by mixed motives, as persons of their type generally are, moral simplicity not being in their line; partly curious, partly fascinated, partly come to spy; in an ambiguous state of mind, neither decidedly in sympathy nor pronouncedly hostile. In any case they cannot remain indifferent to a movement so deep and widespread." [Bruce, *Gk NT*] But Hendriksen, I believe mostly because of John's response to their presence, states they came to receive baptism from John. "Their behavior in the present instance can probably best be explained by their selfishness. They did not wish to lose their hold on the multitudes who were flocking to John to be baptized. If this was the place where the action was they wanted to be part of it, in order, if possible, to assume leadership. But did not submission to the rite of baptism imply confession of sin? Well, if necessary they were even willing to 'stoop to conquer.' Of course, they were not sincere, not really penitent at all nor actually desirous to undergo a radical change of mind and heart. They were deceitful, hypocritical." [Hendriksen, *Matthew*] I've always held they came to look rather than participate, but compare the sense Hendriksen makes with that of today where many join a church as they would a club, e.g. the Eagles, the Elks, Kiwanis, etc.

Warned is a combination of two words "under + to shew," meaning literally *to shew secretly*. Wuest: "*who gave you a private, confidential hint that you should flee from the divine and righteous wrath against sin and sinners which is about to break at any moment?*"

Desert snakes were small in size and deceitful, where one could mistake them for dead branches. Then suddenly they would strike and cling (Acts 28:3, Paul on the island of Melita). Lenski states they were called the offspring of vipers because they had entered into the sins of their fathers. While not demanded, the application is there. Calling one "a son of ..." was a common Semitic phrase in reference to the person's character; e.g. sons of Belial, daughters of music, sons of God, etc.

The picture here is snakes trying to flee from fire, probably a reference to the Jewish practice of setting the stubble in the fields on fire during the harvest in preparation for the winter sowing. According to A. B. Bruce, the emphasis here is not on the Pharisees / Sadducees being vipers but rather that they were fleeing for their lives, although John saw the shallowness of their "repentance." *Meet for repentance*, i.e. "as proof of your repentance." Wuest: "*produce therefore fruit weighing as much as the repentance you profess.*" This message was not only for the Pharisees and Sadducees (only mentioned by Matthew and Mark) but for the entire nation as well (as mentioned by Luke). **How unlike many in our culture who would rather "win a convert" than ensure their repentance is genuine.**

The wrath of God:

- rests upon unregenerate man by nature (Eph 2:3) and pertains even to the present (Jn 3:18, 36; Rom 1:18)
- the final outpouring of this wrath is reserved for the future (Eph 5:6; Col 3:6; 2 Thes 1:8,9; Rev 14:10)
- the outpouring of this wrath is connected with the second coming of Christ (Zeph 1:15; 2:2; Mal 3:2,3; 4:1,5)
- without genuine conversion man cannot escape it: "*who has warned you...*" could be taken to mean "*who deluded you into thinking that it is possible to evade God, and encouraged you to try?*"
- there is an escape for one truly penitent, and this repentance / conversion brings forth fruit: "*bear fruit therefore in keeping with conversion.*" "If, then, ye are in earnest about escape, produce fruit worthy of repentance; repentance

means more than confession and being baptized.” [Bruce, *Gk NT*]

Matt 3:9,10 and think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

Lk 3:8b,9 and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

Presumption is attacked: *think not to say within yourselves*, i.e. think not that you have the right to say, do not presume to say. The verse literally reads “Father we have Abraham” placing *father* at the beginning of the sentence for emphasis, important since the Jews held their physical descent as being sufficient. The Jews were apt to think God would ultimately be kind to them for Abraham’s merits if they had none of their own. “ ‘The merits of the Fathers’ is one of the commonest phrases in the mouth of the Rabbis. Abraham was represented as sitting at the gate of Gehenna, to deliver any Israelite who otherwise might have been consigned to its terrors.” [Edersheim, *Life of Messiah*] John the Baptist was saying what Paul would later say in Rom 2:28,29: one is not a Jew that’s one outwardly but one is a Jew who is one inwardly (see also Gal 3:1-9).

“There was probably a play in the original Aramaic on the words stones and children which it is not possible to reproduce in translation. [Tasker, *Matthew*] Morris says the Aramaic words are stones ‘abnayya’ and children benayya’. The desert rocky terrain where this was being pronounced could also be used as an illustrative aid of God turning hearts of “stone” into obedient hearts (Ez 36:26).

One of the primary focuses of John’s message is **the immanency of the danger:**

- In the preceding verses, *bring forth* is in aorist tense, signifying **complete and immediate action must be taken**. “The aorist further signifies a momentary act: **now or never.**” [Bruce, *Gk NT*]
- *Is hewn down* is prophetic, “is to be cut down.” The word for *hewn down* is in “the present tense, expressive not so much of the usual practice as of **the near inevitable event.**” [Bruce, *Gk NT*] “The present tense is graphic, denoting **what is to happen at once and certainly.**” [Vincent, *Word Studies*]
- Luke says the axe is laid unto the root of the trees, picturing an axe laying beside the tree’s roots, right in front of the roots. Wuest: “*already the axe has been placed at the root of the trees and lies there ready for use.*” The trees are not yet cut down, but the warning is clear. **Judgement is imminent. John was saying the time for repentance is right now!**

One cannot mistake the reference to fire as a connection with the ultimate final judgement when sinners would be cast into **Gehenna** (Mal 4:1; Mt 5:22,29; 18:9; 13:40; Mk 9:47; Jn 15:6). **This fire is unquenchable** (Mt 3:12; 18:8; Mk 9:43; Lk 3:17) which portrays **the eternal wrath of God being poured out on condemned sinners with no end.**

Lk 3:10-14 And the people asked him, saying, What shall we do then? He answereth and saith unto them, He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise. Then came also publicans to be baptized, and said unto him, Master, what shall we do? And he said unto them, Exact no more than that which is appointed you. And the soldiers likewise demanded of him, saying, And what shall we do? And he said unto them, Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages. : John is answering the question “what is expected of me” by sharing what they have with those who have nothing. One author puts it like this: **genuine conversion bears fruit** of generosity, fairness, thoughtfulness, and contentment; in Mt 23:23 the fruit is justice, mercy, faith.

coats = tunics, normally worn under the outer garment but a man might wear more than one for extra warmth or he may have two (Mk 6:9).

The Romans taxed people by farming out the taxing rights to the highest bidder. The publicans (tax collectors) was wont to exacting more than necessary, paying to Rome their due then keeping the rest for expenses / profit. The patriotic Jews especially hated this since it was one of their own who had turned against him. That produced a vicious circle for the more the publicans were hated, the more taxes they would demand. Even the Gentiles despised them (not all publicans were Jewish), having a saying “All publicans are robbers.”

It’s not sure if the soldiers were Roman or Jewish. “Strictly, *soldiers on service*: hence the participle, serving as soldiers, instead of the more comprehensive term [meaning] *soldiers by profession*. Some explain it of soldiers engaged in police inspection in connection with the customs, and hence naturally associated with the publicans.” [Vincent, *Word Study*] If Jewish, they were those who may have been associated with the tax collectors in providing the force to do their work. Either Roman or Jewish, they were in a privileged position against the general public. Citizens had little defense when troops used violence or false charges to rob them. John’s counsel to them is to not presume on their position.

It is worth noting that John does not tell them to leave their jobs but rather to act uprightly in their work.