

# John the Baptist and the Brood of Vipers

by John Piper

---

*John Piper's sermon emphasizes the necessity of genuine repentance and reliance on God's mercy for salvation, as illustrated by John the Baptist's message to the Jews.*

**Scripture:** Luke 3:1, Luke 3:7-9, Romans 9:15

**Topics:** "Repentance", "Salvation"

---

## Description

John Piper preaches on the significance of John the Baptist's ministry as a prophet sent by God to prepare the way for Jesus, emphasizing the call to repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He highlights the importance of understanding true repentance as a turning away from reliance on human distinctions or efforts and turning towards God's free mercy for salvation. Piper explains how John's message challenges the Jews to not trust in their Jewishness for salvation but to bear fruits of repentance, emphasizing that God's mercy is available to all who repent, regardless of ethnicity.

---

## Transcript

February 8, 1981

Luke 3:1-9

1In 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, 2in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness; 3and he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 4As 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. 5Every 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; 6and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

7He said therefore to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8Bear fruits that befit 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 to Abraham. 9Even now the ax 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."

I never have agreed with those people in the history of the church who rejected all fiction as worthless for Christians to read, since it's not factual but deceptive. It is true that novelists and poets and short story writers can deceive, but this is not the case with all writers of fiction. In fact the greatest novelists have their goal not to deceive but to undeceive, that is, to use the medium of a powerful story to unmask our hypocrisies and follies and drive home a great truth. Of course it's not the kind of truth you get in a court report: factual data of events that actually happened. It's moral truth, or truth about human nature.

There have been people who want to view the gospels of the New Testament that way. They say the factual data about events that actually happened are unimportant; what matters is the moral truth, the insight into human nature, the reflected ideals. That would be an appropriate view if the authors of our gospels intended to write that way. But you can't read Luke 3:1 and 2 and miss the point of the author, namely, the people of these accounts were as real as your next-door neighbor, the time and place of these events are not in my imagination but in the flow of world history. John the Baptist's ministry has as much reality in time and space as the rulers you can read about in the history books. It's as if someone were to say to you in 30 years, John Piper came from Bethel College to Bethlehem Baptist Church when Jimmy Carter was president of the United States and Al Quie was governor of Minnesota and Donald Fraser was mayor in Minneapolis and David Durenberger and Rudy Boschwitz were U.S. Senators from Minnesota and Warren Magnuson was General Secretary of the Baptist General Conference and Dick Turnwall was the Executive Minister of the Minnesota Baptist Conference. For most of you that would locate my coming to this church squarely in real remembered history. And that's what Luke was doing for Theophilus, himself probably a Roman official.

So the time and place of the beginning of John's ministry is fixed for us in relation to known historical people and places. The fifteenth year of Tiberias' reign was AD 27 or 28 and the place of John's emergence was out of the wilderness into all the region around the Jordan River.

Now what makes this event significant is what we see in the last part of verse 2, "the word of God came to John." Like all the prophets of the Old Testament, John's authority and power came not from himself but from God. Luke 1:15 said he was filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb. And so now he comes to preach with a word from God and in the power of God's Spirit. That means that even though we live 2000 years later we had better listen to John's message because it is God's message and there is nothing we need more than a clear Word from God for our souls.

In verse 3 John's preaching is described as a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Back in chapter one the angel Gabriel had told Zechariah what John's ministry would be and his words explain what Luke means by repentance in 3:3. "He will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just." (Luke 1:16, 17) Notice the repetition of the word turn: he will turn many of the Israelites to the Lord their God. He will turn the hearts of the fathers and turn the disobedient. This is the meaning of repentance: a turning of the direction of our life and the affections of our heart so that we become oriented on God and love the things He loves. John promises the people "forgiveness of sins" in response to their repentance, their turning to God, but he calls them to demonstrate the seriousness of their turning by accepting baptism in the Jordan.

This was a remarkable demand of John on his Jewish kinsmen. In the context in which John lived baptism had one main significance among the Jews: it was the symbolic rite that proselytes had to go through to become Jewish. This made John's baptism very offensive. It implied that unless the Jews were willing to

repent they were not really Jews and could not count on the promised blessings God had made to his chosen people. Or to put it another way, in calling Jews to accept a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins John was telling them that they cannot rely on their Jewishness for salvation; they have to be changed in their heart toward God.

And Luke's understanding of John's baptism is that it implied that the way was open for Gentiles to repent and be forgiven. If Jewishness does not save, then Gentilishness does not necessarily condemn: the issue is repentance toward God. The way Luke shows us that John's baptism and preaching had this significance is in the quotation he cites from Isaiah in verses 4-6. One of the ways to find out what the special point is that Luke wants to make is to compare his account with Matthew's and Mark's and see what Luke adds or omits. All three, Matthew, Mark and Luke, quote Isaiah 40:3 as a description of John's ministry: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight (cf. Matt. 3:3, Mark 1:3). But Luke is the only one who goes on to quote Isaiah 40:4,5, "Every valley shall be filled and every mountain 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." Why did Luke go on to quote Isaiah 40:4 and 5? I think the reason was to point out that the repentance John was beginning to preach and the salvation that Jesus will bring is for all flesh not just for Israel. The mountains are lowered, the crooked ways are straightened, the rough ways are smoothed so that all flesh, all people might see and have access to salvation.

There is a really interesting confirmation that this is just what Luke is trying to get across here. The Greek word for salvation in Luke 3:6 is not the more common one but a rare one that occurs in Luke's two volumes, Luke-Acts, only three times: here, in 2:30 and in Acts 28:28. Notice that the point in each place is to stress that now salvation is being made clearly available for Gentiles as well as Jews. In Luke 2:30,31 Simeon says of the baby Jesus, "My eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles. . . ." And in Acts 28:28 Paul says to the Jews who rejected the Gospel, "Let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen." So Luke begins and ends his big two-volume work with this emphasis: the salvation Jesus brings is for all men and any attempt to limit its proclamation or effect to any ethnic group or groups is wrong.

So I think Luke confirms for us that John's baptism implies both that Jewishness is no guarantee of salvation and that non-Jewishness is no hindrance from salvation; what matters is repentance unto the forgiveness of sins.

Now notice that John hasn't even spoken yet. Everything so far has been Luke's description and interpretation of John's ministry. Now he lets John speak. And what we hear is a confirmation of what we have heard already from Luke. Verse 7: "He said therefore to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'" With this first sentence John does four things. First, he very bluntly tells the whole crowd that they are in a rotten condition. You are a brood of vipers. What does that mean to Jews schooled in the Old Testament? In Genesis 3 Satan is pictured as a serpent or a viper, and God says to the serpent, "I will put enmity between . . . your seed and her seed" (Genesis 3:15). So when anybody said you were the seed or the brood of a viper, it was the same as saying you were sons of the devil. That's exactly what Jesus said in John 8:43f to another crowd, "Why do you not understand what I say. It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires." So John's first word is an indictment of his listeners: you are people in Satan's grip. You are his children, with his nature.

Second, John warns that there is wrath on the way. God will bring judgment upon Satan and all his allies. In verse 17 John pictures the Messiah's coming like this, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." There is wheat and there is chaff. There are sons of God and sons of the viper and the one will be gathered into the barn of heaven and the other thrown into the fire of hell. So John warns that there is a coming wrath which makes the plight of vipers extremely precarious.

Third, John mentions that there is an escape from wrath. You can flee from it and the vipers are fleeing in the right direction, namely to the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. When God forgives sins it is the same as removing his wrath. There is no more condemnation for those who repent and receive forgiveness.

Finally, John hints by his question that the crowd's decision to come to him in search of salvation that the crowd's decision to come to him in search of salvation was not something they came to on their own. Someone showed them they needed to repent. I understand John's question to mean something like this: "Well of all things, the sons of the devil are fleeing the impending wrath. Who could have possibly made it plain to you that you needed to repent?" John is amazed, I think, that they have really been made aware of their need to flee God's wrath. It was no small thing for a Jew to admit he was under the wrath of God and liable to be burned like chaff in unquenchable fire. But here they were offering themselves for John's baptism. And John is amazed. If we could ask John, What is the answer to your question: Who did warn them to flee?, what would he have said? I think he would have said, God warned them. If Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father draw him," then surely it would be true earlier that no son of the Viper can come to repentance unless God draw him. So in an indirect way John's question was giving tribute to the grace of God for impressing on these people their need of salvation.

Now in verse 8 John tries to give these former vipers a new image of what they are. You are no longer poisonous snakes now that you are repenting, you are fruitful trees. There is fruit that comes from genuine repentance. Start bearing that fruit as a witness to others and to your own conscience that you have truly turned to God. He spells out some of what that fruit is in verses 10-14, but first he gives a warning. It's this warning in verse 8 that confirms to us Luke's earlier explanation of John's baptism, namely that Jewishness is no guarantee of salvation and non-Jewishness is no hindrance from salvation.

John says in verse 8, "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.'" Don't let the old serpent sow the deceptive seed in your mind: "Hey! What am I doing here in this river getting baptized like a common Gentile! Who does this guy think he is telling sons of Abraham that we are in the same boat with the rest of the world and under God's wrath. Why, haven't we learned from the time we were little the word of God to Abraham in Genesis 17:7 and 8, "I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you and to your descendants after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God." Now how can a son of Abraham then ever worry about being swept away like chaff by the wrath of God?" John is warning the Jews that such a line of reasoning is a great mistake. A person should never think that any merely human distinctive (like Jewishness) can obligate God to bless. The Jews are a great lesson book to all of us who tend to rely on anything for salvation other than the mercy of God.

John gives the reason why Jews shouldn't rely on their Jewishness: "for I tell you God is able to raise up from these stones children to Abraham." This is a tremendously revealing statement. The first thing it

reveals is that John and the Jews agree on something. They agree that there must be children of Abraham to inherit the promises, otherwise God's word would fail. They agree that God's word will never fail and that there will always be children of Abraham to inherit the promises.

But the second thing John's statement reveals is a profound disagreement with the Jews if they start to rely on their Jewishness. They disagree about the freedom and the power of God. Some of the Jews think that by virtue of their physical Jewishness they've got God in a corner. He must bless them. He can't pour out wrath on them, because he always keeps his word. So it does not matter finally if they are repentant or not. They are relying not on God's mercy but on their own ethnic human distinctive. What they fail to see and what John shows them is that God is not as boxed in as they think. He is able both to keep his promises to Abraham and to put a stop to their boasting in their physical descent from Abraham. How? He can wipe them out in his wrath and raise up out of nothing a new people for himself who will bear the fruits of repentance and trust not themselves but in God's free mercy alone.

What these Jews had forgotten--and it's what all people forget when they try to obligate God by any of their human distinctives or human efforts--they forgot the freedom of God to have mercy on whomever he wills. They forgot the power of God who can always find a way to rebuke human self-reliance while keeping his promises. So verse 9 repeats the warning implicit in verse 7. "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." Don't trust in the kind of tree you are. If there is no fruit that accords with repentance you will be destroyed. It doesn't matter if the tree is Jewish or Gentile, what matters is repentance and its fruit.

Let me conclude by defining repentance afresh now that we have seen in a new way what the Jews were being called to turn away from and what they were being called to turn to. It should make us tremble to think that a people who had such a strong God consciousness and who believed that God would keep his promises could nevertheless be called a "brood of vipers" and be threatened with hell fire. Are there not religious people today who don't believe this much but feel secure? We must look very carefully to see what repentance is here that we too might flee the coming wrath. In view of what we have seen in John's warning, I would define repentance like this: Repentance is turning away from any and all reliance upon what I am by birth (like Jewish or Gentile) or what I have done by my own effort and turning to the absolutely free mercy of God for the hope of salvation. Mercy by its very nature cannot be constrained or obligated by human distinctives or efforts. As Paul says in Romans 9:15,16, "God says 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.'" So it depends not on man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy." But for our comfort and assurance God has revealed that there is one thing that always receives mercy and that is reliance on mercy, which is what the New Testament means by faith.

Repentance, therefore, is the altering of what we rely on in life, what we hope in, what we are counting on for salvation in the age to come and for help now. The repentance that leads to forgiveness of sins is turning away from what we are by birth or achieve by effort to rely wholly on mercy, God's free and sovereign grace.

There is a lifestyle that follows such repentance just as surely as cats have kittens and dogs have puppies. But we will talk about that next week from verses 10-14.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-piper/john-the-baptist-and-the-brood-of-vipers/>

# *Grow in Your Walk with Christ*

---

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

**[www.sermonindex.net](http://www.sermonindex.net)**