

3:1 *In those days*- Presumably this connects with 2:23, meaning that whilst the Lord was still living in Nazareth, John began preaching. One wonders whether John maybe began his ministry up to three and a half years before the baptism of Jesus, seeing his work was typical of the three and a half year Elijah ministry preparing for the *second* coming of the Lord Jesus.

3:2 *The Kingdom of Heaven*- There has always been the rulership of God over the individuals whose hearts accept His Kingship. But through the work of the Lord Jesus, this rulership was made so much greater, and His example, teaching and spirit enabled believers to come more totally within that rulership. But clearly the Kingdom was "at hand" not in the sense of its literal establishment on earth physically, but in that as King of the Kingdom, the Lord Jesus could rightly have "the Kingdom of Heaven" as a title.

*Heaven*- It appears that Matthew under inspiration expressed the Gospel in terms which were attractive and not unduly provocative to his hearers, hence he uses 'Heaven' for 'God' as was common Jewish practice. We too should present the Gospel with the same kind of forethought to the sensitivities and nature of our audience, rather than baldly present 'truth' to them considering that we have thereby done our duty. We are not seeking to merely fulfil a duty, but to actually "so speak" that we convert men and women.

*Repent*- Another possibility is that the Kingdom of God / Heaven could have come soon at that time ["at hand"] *if* Israel had repented. Then they would not have killed their Messiah and King but rather accepted Him. Whilst God's purpose was not ultimately thwarted by Israel's rejection of the Lord Jesus and their impenitence, the Divine project would have taken a different form if they had repented and accepted Him. We note that those who responded to John's call to repentance were again asked to "Repent" by the Lord (Mt. 4:17). Their repentance was therefore only surface level. The Lord cursed the fig tree (cp. Israel) because they had only leaves, an appearance of repentance and spiritual fruit in responding to John's message, but actually there was not even the first sign of real fruit on that tree when it was really analysed. The Lord describes John as mourning to his audience, and them *not* mourning in sympathy and response (Lk. 7:32). They rejoiced in the idea of repentance, but never really got down to it.

3:3 *For this is he*- Is this part of John's message about *Jesus*? Or is this a note from Matthew about *John* being the voice in the wilderness? The other Gospel writers use the Isaiah quotation as if it is their comment on John (Mk. 1:3; Lk. 3:4). The present tense 'this is he' can be understood as part of the dramatic present tense style of some parts of the Gospels [see on 2:19]. The way Mt. 3:4 continues "And this same John..." might suggest that "This is he" is also Matthew's comment about John.

*The voice*- When asked who he was, John's reply was simply: "a voice" (Lk. 3:7). He was nothing; his message about Jesus was everything. In all this there is a far cry from the self-confident, self-projecting speaking off the podium which characterizes so much of our 'preaching' today. So John's appeal to repentance was shot through with a recognition of his own humanity. It wasn't mere moralizing. We likely don't preach as John did because we

fear that confronting people with their sins is inappropriate for us to do, because we too are sinners. But with recognition of our own humanity, we build a bridge between our audience and ourselves. In this context it's worth reconsidering Lk. 3:7: "Who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come?". John said these words to those who were coming to him wishing to be baptized by him- exactly because he had warned them of the wrath to come. It's possible that John meant this as a rhetorical reflection, thus enabling us to paraphrase him something like this: 'And what kind of man am I, who am I, just another sinful guy like you, who has warned you to flee? I'm nothing- don't get baptized because of me, but because you repent and are committed to bringing forth the fruits of repentance'. And it's worth meditating that if Israel had responded to his preaching, then the glorious salvation of God might have even then been revealed in the form of the Kingdom coming on earth, even then. But instead of heeding John's message, Israel in the end crucified their King, necessitating a latter day John the Baptist mission (Mt. 11:13,14; 17:11,12). And it's not going too far to suggest that our latter day witness to Israel and indeed to the world is to be conducted in the spirit of John's preaching; hence the crucial importance of understanding the spirit and content of his witness.

*In the wilderness-* John the Baptist prepared a highway in the desert through baptizing repentant people (Mk. 1:3,4). This highway was to be a path *to* Christ as well as the one He would travel. Those converted became a path to Christ for others. One purpose of our calling to the Gospel is to assist others onto that same way. And it's worth reflecting that Christ can only come once the way for Him is prepared- as if His coming depends upon a certain level of response to our preaching, especially to the Jews of the very last days.

*Prepare the way of the Lord-* The quotation from Isaiah suggests that if the way was prepared by human repentance, then this would be the path over which the Lord's glory would return to Zion in the establishment of the Kingdom. See on 3:2 *repent*. The strong suggestion is that the Lord's coming in glory was a possibility if Israel had repented at John's preaching and accepted Jesus as their Messiah. Lk. 3:6 goes on to say that if they had repented, then the prophecy that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God" would come true- and that is clearly language of the future Kingdom of God on earth. For not even all Israel saw / perceived the Jesus / salvation of God, let alone "all flesh". The term "all flesh" is used frequently in the OT about mankind generally rather than just Israel; indeed it is used in contradistinction to Israel (Dt. 5:26; Job 34:15; Is. 49:26; Is. 66:16,23,24; Jer. 25:31; Dan. 4:12).

*Prepare the way... His paths-* The implication is that the repentance of people in Judah would make straight the Lord's path over which He would travel. Repentant people are therefore His way to Jerusalem. This of itself suggests that the Lord shall only come to Zion once there is repentance in Israel, seeing repentant people are the way or road which enables Him to travel. The allusion is clearly to the practice of preparing the road for an important person to travel upon. The whole metaphor suggests that Christ will only come to Zion once His people are spiritually ready, once there is repentance, perhaps specifically in Israel. John the Baptist was to prepare the Lord's way (Lk. 1:76 same Greek words). But it was repentant people who were to prepare the Lord's way. John's appeal was for others to prepare the Lord's way by

repentance. But his preaching meant that he was the one preparing the way; the change of life in his hearers would therefore as it were be counted to John. The work of preparing the Lord's way is mentioned in Mal. 3:1 as being the work of "the messenger"; and the context appears to be the restoration from Babylon. Perhaps because those addressed in Is. 40:1 ("Prepare ye") failed in their task and God sought to see it fulfilled through a specific messenger.

The ideas of fleeing wrath (Lk. 3:7) and preparing a way are surely based upon the Law's command in Dt. 19:3 that a way or road should be prepared to the city of refuge (symbolic of Christ- Heb. 6:18), along which the person under the death sentence for manslaughter could flee for refuge. John was preparing that way or road to Christ, and urging ordinary people to flee along it. They didn't like to think they were under a death sentence for murder. They were just ordinary folk like the soldiers who grumbled about their wages, and the publicans who were a bit less than honest at work. But they had to flee. But they wouldn't be alone in that. If a man prepares his way after God's principles (2 Chron. 27:6; Prov. 4:26), then God will 'prepare' that man's way too (Ps. 37:23; 119:5), confirming him in the way of escape.

*His paths straight-* There is a definite allusion to the language here in Acts 13:10, where a man is accused by Paul of perverting "the right [s.w. 'straight'] ways of the Lord". Paul clearly saw *his* mission as likewise to prepare straight paths for the Lord Jesus by preaching the Gospel of transformation. The implication could be that John's mission ultimately failed, in that the Lord Jesus did not come to Zion in glory. Paul seems to imply that therefore that work is now placed upon all Christian preachers; we are to prepare the way so that the Lord can come to Zion and establish God's Kingdom. When we read that Paul instructed men "in the way of the Lord" (Acts 18:25) we have the same idea- we are preparing the way of the Lord Jesus. Each person who is truly converted is part of the Lord's highway, and once there is sufficient transformation of human life, the way will be ready enough for the Lord to return upon it.

Just as the preaching of the Gospel was to make straight paths for the Messiah to come (Lk. 3:4), so we are to make *our* paths straight (Heb. 12:13)- as if somehow we are the Lord Jesus; His revelation to this world at the second coming will in a sense be our revelation. Hence the final visions of Revelation speak of the Lord's second coming in terms which are applicable to the community of those in Him [e.g. a city of people coming down from Heaven to earth]. John's preaching was in order to make [s.w. 'to bring forth fruit'] His [the Lord's] paths straight- but the ways of the Lord are "right" [s.w. "straight"] anyway (Acts 13:10). So how could John's preaching make the Lord's ways straight / right, when they already are? God is so associated with His people that their straightness or crookedness reflects upon Him; for they are His witnesses in this world. His ways are their ways. This is the N.T. equivalent of the O.T. concept of keeping / walking in the way of the Lord (Gen. 18:19; 2 Kings 21:22). Perhaps this is the thought behind the exhortation of Heb. 12:13 to make straight paths for our own feet. We are to bring our ways into harmony with the Lord's ways; for He is to be us, His ways our ways. Thus Is. 40:3, which is being quoted in Lk. 3:4, speaks of "Prepare ye the way of the Lord", whereas Is. 62:10 speaks of "Prepare ye the way of the people". Yet tragically, the way / path of Israel was not the way / path of the Lord (Ez. 18:25).

There was an intensity and critical urgency about John and his message. John urged people to make their path “straight”- using a Greek word elsewhere translated “immediately”, “forthwith” (Lk. 3:4 s.w. Mk. 1:12,28 and often). Getting things straight in our lives is a question of immediate response. He warns people to “flee from the wrath to come” (Lk. 3:7). This was what their changed lives and baptisms were to be about- a fleeing from the wrath to come. He speaks as if that “wrath to come” is just about to come, it’s staring them in the face like a wall of forest fire, and they are to flee away from it. And yet Paul (in one of his many allusions to John’s message, which perhaps he had heard himself ‘live’) speaks of “the wrath to come” as being the wrath of the final judgment (1 Thess. 1:10), or possibly that of AD70 (1 Thess. 2:16). But both those events would not have come upon the majority of John’s audience. And the day of ‘wrath to come’ is clearly ultimately to be at the Lord’s return (Rev. 6:17; 11:18). Yet John zooms his hearers forward in time, to perceive that they face condemnation and judgment day right now, as they hear the call of the Gospel. This was a feature of John; he had the faith which sees things which are not as though they already are. Thus he looked at Jesus walking towards him and commented that here was the “Lamb of God”, a phrase the Jews would’ve understood as referring to the lamb which was about to be sacrificed on Passover (Jn. 1:29). John presumably was referencing the description of the crucified Jesus in Is. 53:7; for John, he foresaw it all, it was as if he saw Jesus as already being led out to die, even though that event was over three years distant. And so he could appeal to his audience to face judgment day as if they were standing there already. We need to have the same perspective.

John the Baptist's ministry was so that the 'crooked' nation of Israel should be 'made straight' and ready to accept Jesus as Messiah (Lk. 3:5). God's enabling power was present so that this might have happened; but the same word is used in Acts 2:40 and Phil. 2:15 to describe Israel as still being a 'crooked' nation. John's preaching, like ours, was potentially able to bring about the conversion of an entire nation. So instead of being discouraged by the lack of response to our witness, let's remember the enormous potential power which there is behind it. Every word, witness of any kind, tract left lying on a seat... has such huge potential conversion power lodged within it, a power from God Himself. John's mission was to prepare Israel for Christ, to figuratively *'bring low'* the hills and mountains, the proud Jews of first century Israel, and raise the valleys, i.e. inspire the humble with the real possibility of salvation in Christ (Lk. 3:5). Paul uses the same Greek word for "bring low" no fewer than three times, concerning how the Gospel has humbled him (Acts 20:19; 2 Cor. 11:7; Phil. 4:12). It's as if he's saying: 'John's preaching did finally have its' effect upon me; it did finally make me humble enough for the Lord Jesus'. And as John made straight paths for men's feet that they might come unto Christ (Mt. 3:3), so did Paul (Heb. 12:13). There was another reason behind John's appeal for repentance. It was that he perceived how eager God is to forgive, and how our acceptance of that forgiveness is His glory and His salvation. John says, quoting Is. 40:5, that if men repent and ready themselves for the Lord's coming, then “all flesh shall see the salvation of God”. But he is changing the quotation- Isaiah said that all flesh shall see the glory of God. But saving men and women is the thing God glories in.

3:4 *Had his clothing*- The Greek *ekho* translated "had" is also translated 'conceive', 'count' and 'take for'. He took himself as Elijah. Clearly John was consciously presenting himself as the Elijah prophet by the way he dressed. He had to make some personal effort to fulfill the prophecies about him. Even if a calling is intended for us by God, we still have to make conscious effort to fulfill it. We can easily overestimate the amount and frequency of Divine contact with Bible characters. It was not so much that John was told 'You are to be the Elijah prophet, now you must dress, act and speak like him!'. The choice of dress, appearance and even location in the wilderness were all probably John's own conscious attempts to be like Elijah, without being specifically asked. We too are set up with Bible characters whom we are asked to follow in essence- for this is why so much of God's word is really history. And there are ways in which the initiative is left with us as to how and how far we follow them.

*Camel's hair*- This was not the clothing of the poor- their garments were typically made of goat's hair. Indeed, camel's hair coats were a luxury. We therefore conclude that John was consciously modeling himself on Elijah, who had dressed like this (2 Kings 1:8).

*Wild honey*- Not necessarily from bees, but perhaps tree gum e.g. from the tamarisk tree.

3:5 These global terms such as 'all Judaea' clearly aren't literal- people from all Judaea went out to John. Perhaps John set up his place of witness as he did so that those interested had to make some effort to come out to him for baptism, considering that candidates had to make some effort and show some commitment. On the other hand, if he wanted to reach as many people as possible, surely he could've set up his place of preaching and baptism in the city and thereby attracted and saved more people. For not everyone was able to make the long journey down to Jordan and back. One wonders whether he made the same mistake as the historical Elijah, in having too low a view of others. Whatever, his hard hitting message attracted people, so much so that the city dwellers streamed out to him, motivated by the testimony of the others who had been there and returned to share the good news of sin confessed and forgiven and of the coming of the Christ.

3:6 *Confessing their sins*- As if they confessed their sins whilst in the water and the baptism process was ongoing. *Exomologeho* essentially means to agree with, hence the same word is used about 'confessing' in the sense of praising (s.w. Mt. 11:25, Rom. 15:9). To repent, to confess sin, is essentially to agree with God's perspective on our sins. They agreed that they were sinners. Elsewhere, what they did is described as 'the baptism of repentance', of *metanoia* (Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3; Acts 13:24; 19:4). *Metanoia* strictly means to think again, or legally, a reversal of a legal decision. The legal connotations of the language are developed further in Romans 1-8, which expounds the Gospel in terms of the court room. I have suggested elsewhere that Paul may have heard John preaching, for all Jerusalem went to hear his message, including "many of the Pharisees" (:7), and Paul the Pharisee was living in Jerusalem at the time. This would explain his many allusions to John's teaching, and it could be that the whole legal approach of Romans 1-8 is based upon this language of charge, agreement with the charge and re-thinking of the human case which we meet here, right at the start of the NT Gospel story (see on 3:7 *The wrath to come* to see how Romans uses John's term 10 times). The decision that we are condemned must be agreed with by us, whereas

previously we had not agreed with it- considering us to be not that bad as people, victims of circumstance etc. Our re-thinking leads to God's re-thinking and reversal of the judgment against us. Note that the whole sense of the Greek words for 'confessing' and 'repenting' is internal to the human mind. Practical change is not of itself implied in the words. This of course comes as a result of a genuine agreement with the charge of sin and a radical re-thinking. It is not therefore for us to demand repentance from others in terms of external appearance. We cannot judge the secrets of the heart, and are to accept repentance as claimed, seeing that it is a deeply personal and internal affair.

*3:7 Come to his baptism-* Lk. 3:12 records how there "came also publicans to be baptized, and said unto him, Master, what shall we do?". There is a parallel between desiring baptism and realizing that they must *do* something concretely in their lives. The baptism process brings us into the realm of God's gracious forgiveness and redemption, and into living contact with the real Christ. There is no way we can be passive to this and do nothing about it. Note that Matthew himself was a publican- this is an example of the Gospel records being a transcript of the message standardly taught by e.g. Matthew.

*Generation of vipers-* This intense, urgent presentation of the ultimate issues of life and death, acceptance and rejection, brought forth a massive response. People lined up for baptism. And John was hardly polite. He called his baptismal candidates a "generation of vipers", alluding obviously to the seed of the serpent in Gen. 3:15. Yet his tough line with them, his convicting them of sin, led them to ask what precisely they must do, in order to be baptized. They didn't turn away in offence. They somehow sensed he was for real, and the message he preached couldn't be ignored or shrugged off as the ravings of a fanatic. Time and again we see the same- the very height of the demand of Christ of itself convicts men and women of Him. And it's for this reason that it seems almost 'easier' to convict people of Christ and the need for baptism into Him in societies [e.g. radical Moslem ones] where the price for conversion to Him is death or serious persecution... than in the easy going Western countries where being 'Christian' is the normal cultural thing to do. The Gospel was presented in different forms by the early preachers, according to their audience. John the Baptist set the pattern in this. Having quoted the prophecy about the need for the rough to be made smooth and the proud to be humbled in order for them to accept Jesus, John "said *therefore* to the multitude... ye offspring of vipers" (Lk. 3:7 RV). He used tough and startling language because that was what the audience required. He had set his aims- to humble the proud. And so he used "therefore" appropriate approaches. The early preachers as Paul became all things to all men, so that they might win some. They therefore consciously matched their presentation and *how* they articulated the same basic truths to their audience. But perhaps even his comment "Generation of vipers" was said with a heart of love and appeal, reflecting the "heart of mercy" which he had come to know in the Father. He was "the friend of the bridegroom" (Jn. 3:29)- the one who introduced the groom to the bride and arranged the marriage and then the wedding. John's "Generation of vipers" stuff was all part of his attempt to persuade the bride, Israel, to accept the groom, the Lord Jesus. He wasn't angrily moralizing, lashing out at society as many a dysfunctional preacher does today, working out his own anger by criticizing and condemning society in the name of God. No,

John was appealing. He had an agenda and an aim- to bring Israel and the Son of God together in marriage.

*Warned you-* The Greek means to exemplify, to 'exhibit under the eyes', and can imply that John had himself shown them the way of repentance by having done so himself. John the Baptist rhetorically asked his hearers: "Who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Mt. 3:7). The answer, of course, was 'Well, you, John'. And John continues: "Bring forth *therefore* [i.e., because I am the one who taught you] fruits meet for repentance". John recognizes that his converts will be after his image in one sense; as Paul put it, what his hearers had heard and seen in him as he preached, they were to do. So I suggest the emphasis should be on the word 'who', rather than on the word 'you'. The sense is not 'You lot of sinners? Ha! And where did you lot hear of the need for repentance!'. Rather is it a rhetorical question. Who warned them to flee from the wrath to come? John himself. Here we see another window onto the humility of John in his appeal. He is saying that he too has confessed and repented of his sins, and he knew this was witnessed in his life. And he asks the legalistic Pharisees to follow his example. John was asking them to repent of their legalism and accept Jesus as Messiah, and it would seem that John had had to pass through that very same path himself, freeing himself from the Essene's legalism which it seems he had got associated with. And Elijah, John's role model, was another man who was led to repent of exclusivism and legalism. The point is clinched by a look at the Greek word translated 'warned'. It literally means to exhibit, to exemplify. John was the pattern for them. And if Paul was indeed amongst that crowd of cynical Pharisees, Paul was ultimately John's most stellar convert, although little did he realize it at the time. The same can happen with our preaching. We may make converts years after our death. And the lesson comes home clearly, that the preacher or the teacher is to be the living embodiment of his or her message, the word being preached made flesh in the preacher.

*The wrath to come-* A common idea of Paul's especially in his letter to the Romans (Rom. 1:18; 2:5,8; 3:5; 4:15; 5:9; 9:22;12:19; 13:4,5). 1 Thess. 2:16 surely alludes here in speaking of how the wrath has come upon the orthodox Jews. See on 3:6. In Mt. 23:33 Jesus seems to say that it is now impossible for that group to flee the coming wrath. Even in this life the frame of opportunity can come to an end before death.

Paul alluded to some parts of the Gospels much more than others. An example of this is the way in which he alluded so extensively to the passages related to John the Baptist. I would suggest that the reason for this is that he saw John as somehow his hero, one for whom he had a deep respect. In doing so he was sharing the estimation of his Lord, who also saw John as one of the greatest believers. There are many 'unconscious' links between Paul's writings and the records of John, indicating how deeply the example and words of John were in Paul's mind (e.g. Mt. 3:7 = 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9; Jn. 3:31 = 1 Cor. 15:47). Or consider how John said that wicked Jewry would be "hewn down" (Mt. 3:10); Paul uses the very same word to describe how the Jewish branches had now been "cut off" (Rom. 11:22,24). Paul saw himself as being like the best man, who had betrothed the believers to Christ (2 Cor. 11:2,3)- just as John had described himself as the friend of the bridegroom (Jn. 3:28). Or again, reflect how

Paul's mention of John in Acts 13:24,25 apparently adds nothing to his argument; it seems out of context. But it surely indicates the degree to which John was never far below the surface in Paul's thinking.

3:8 It seems likely that Paul went to hear John the Baptist preach; "there went out to him all the land of Judea and they of Jerusalem" (Mk. 1:5), and at this time Paul was living in Jerusalem. I believe Paul heard John and was convicted by him of Christ. John preached the need to "bring forth fruits meet unto repentance" (Mt. 3:8); and Paul made those his own watchwords in his world-wide preaching (Acts 26:20)- Paul describes his preaching in language which is directly alluding to how John preached. As John said that he was *sent* to baptize, but especially to witness of Christ (Jn. 1:33), so Paul felt that he too was *sent to baptize*, but his emphasis was more on the preaching of Christ than physically baptizing (1 Cor. 1:17).

*Fruits*- "Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance" must be connected with our Lord's description of the Gentile believers as "a nation bringing forth the (vineyard) fruits" of the Kingdom (Mt. 21:43). These are defined in Rom. 14:17: "The Kingdom of God is... righteousness, and peace, and joy". Christ's parable of the vine in Jn. 15 explains that it is the word abiding in us which brings forth fruit. Bringing forth fruit is therefore a way of life (cp. Rom. 6:21,22). In each aspect in which we 'bear fruit', we have in a sense 'repented'. Our repentance and fruit-bearing is not something which we can set time limits on within this life. Christ would have been satisfied if Israel had borne at least some immature fruit (Lk. 13:7). Only when there is no fruit at all, in any aspect of spiritual life, will Christ reject us. Some will bear more fruit than others- some sixty, some an hundredfold. Mt. 3:8 connects repentance with fruit bearing. This shows that God may recognize *degrees* of repentance and response to His word, as He recognizes degrees of fruit bearing. It is far too simplistic for us to label some of our brethren as having repented and others as being totally unrepentant. In any case, the fruits of repentance are brought forth unto *God*, not necessarily to fellow believers (Rom. 7:4). There is a marked dearth of evidence to show that a believer must prove his repentance in outward terms before his brethren can accept him. The "fruits" John had in mind are made more explicit in Luke 3. In order to prepare the way of the Lord, to make a level passage for Him, the man with two coats should give to him who had none, and likewise share his food (Lk. 3:11). So the 'equality' and levelling was to be one of practical care for others. We have to ask, how often we have shared our food, clothing or money with those who don't have... for this is all part of preparing for the Lord's coming. It could even be that when there is more of what Paul calls "an equality" amongst the community of believers, that then the way of the Lord will have been prepared. And He will then return.

And yet despite the demand for "fruits", John the Baptist showed a spirit of concession to human weakness in his preaching. He told the publicans: "Extort no more than that which is appointed you" (Lk. 3:13 RV). He tacitly accepted that these men would be into extortion. But within limits, he let it go. Likewise he told soldiers to be content with their wages- not to quit the job. And seeing there were no Roman Legions in Judaea at his time [Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.5.1], these were likely Jewish soldiers. He didn't tell them to quit their jobs, but to live with integrity within those jobs. He told the soldiers to be content with their

wages- implying he expected them to not throw in their job. This is juxtaposed with the command for them to do no violence. But not grumbling about wages was as fundamental an issue for John as not doing physical violence to people. To have as Paul put it “Godliness with contentment” [another of his allusions to John’s preaching?] is as important as not doing violence. And yet our tendency is to think that moaning about our wages is a perfectly normal and acceptable thing to do, whereas violence is of an altogether different order. It’s like Paul hitting the Corinthians for their divisiveness, when if we’d been writing to them we would likely have focused upon their immorality and false doctrine. John would have been far less demanding had he simply told the publicans and soldiers to quit their jobs. By asking them to continue, and yet to live out their lives within those jobs with Godly principles, He was being far more demanding. John places complaining about wages [a common human fault] in juxtaposition with doing violence to others (Lk. 3:14)- to show that in his serious call to a devout and holy life, there are no such things as little sins. Ez. 16:49,50 defines the sins of Sodom as including “pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor... they were haughty, and committed abomination”. The abomination of their sexual perversion is placed last in the list, as if to emphasize that all the other sins were just as much sin. Likewise Paul writes to the Corinthians about their failures, but he doesn’t start where I would have started- with their drunkenness at the memorial meeting. Instead he starts off with their disunity. Those things which we may consider as lesser sins, the Bible continually lists together with those things we have been conditioned into thinking are the greater sins. Clearest of all is the way Paul lists schism and hatred in his lists of sins that will exclude from the Kingdom. The Anglo-Saxon worldview has taught that sexual sin is so infinitely far worse than a bit of argument within a church. But is this really right...?

3:9 *Within yourselves*- Always the Biblical emphasis is upon internal thought processes and the need to be aware of them. John's great convert Paul several times uses the same device in his letters- foreseeing the likely thought process in response to his message, and answering it ahead of time (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:35).

*These stones*- Pointing to them. Perhaps they were the 12 stones set up after the Jordan crossing (Josh. 3 and 4). There is a word play between *avanim*, stones, and *banim*, sons. *Avanim*, stones, in turn sounds like *evyonim*, the term for the poor, the social outcasts- these were the "stones" which were being accepted into the covenant of grace.

3:10 John's words about cutting down the fruitless tree are directly quoted by the Lord Jesus in Mt. 7:17-19; 12:33- as if to show His solidarity with John's teaching. Perhaps the Lord Jesus had heard these very words being preached by John when He went to be baptized by him.

*Now also*- Right now. John felt that the day of Christ's judgment was very close. The language of gathering grain into the barn and burning the chaff is used by the Lord concerning the future judgment at His second coming (Mt. 13:30). John saw the Lord Jesus as already having the winnowing fork in His hand (:13), meaning that in essence, judgment

began with the ministry of Jesus. In essence, we stand before His judgment right now. Judgment day is not some unknown future entity which has no connection with this life.

3:11 Christ "shall baptize *you*" plural (Mt. 3:11) was deeply meditated upon by Paul, until he came to see in the fact that we *plural* are baptized the strong implication that therefore we should be one body, without unnecessary divisions (= 1 Cor. 12:13).

John prophesied that the disciples would be baptized with fire (Mt 3:11); this was fulfilled by tongues of Spirit descending which looked like fire (Acts 2:3). Evidently this was not literal fire or else it would not have rested on the heads of the disciples. So the words of Matthew 3:11 spoke of how things would *appear* to the disciples, without saying so explicitly.

*Not worthy*- John described himself as a preacher of Christ who was not "worthy" to do so (Mt. 3:11). The same Greek word is used by Paul when he says he is "not *meet* (s.w.) to be called an apostle" (1 Cor. 15:9); and that it was God's grace alone that had made him an "*able* (s.w. "worthy") minister of the Gospel" (2 Cor. 13:6). He knew that his "*sufficiency*" (s.w. "worthy") to give knowledge of salvation (John language- Lk. 1:77), to be a preacher, was from God alone (2 Cor. 2:16; 3:5); and that in fact this was true of *all* preachers. But do we really feel like this in our preaching? John was a burning and shining light to the world (Jn. 5:35), just as we should be (Phil. 2:15). And therefore, if we are to witness as John did, we need to have the humility of John in our preaching. He was 'in the Truth' from a baby, he lived a spiritual, self-controlled life. And yet he had this great sense of personal sinfulness and unworthiness as a preacher. It's difficult for those raised Christian to have the sense of sinfulness which Paul had, and thereby to have his zeal for preaching. But actually his zeal was a reflection of John's; and John was a 'good boy', brought up in the Faith. Yet he had a burning sense of his spiritual inadequacy. Anglo-Saxon Christianity urgently needs to capture his spirit. Truly Paul 'bore' Christ to the world just as John 'bore' (s.w.) Christ's Gospel (Acts 9:15 = Mt. 3:11). If ever a man was hard on himself, it was John the Baptist. His comment on his preaching of Christ was that he was not worthy (RVmg. 'sufficient') to bear Christ's sandals (Mt. 3:11). The sandal-bearer was the herald; John knew he was heralding Christ's appearing, but he openly said he was not worthy to do this. He felt his insufficiency, as we ought to ours. Would we had that depth of awareness; for on the brink of the Lord's coming, we are in a remarkably similar position to John. Paul perhaps directs us back to John when he says that we are not "sufficient" to be the savour of God to this world; and yet we are made sufficient to preach by God (2 Cor. 2:16; 3:5,6 RV). To carry the master's sandals (Mt. 3:11) was, according to Vine, the work of the lowest slave. This was how John saw himself; and this is what witnessing for Jesus is all about, being the lowest slave and servant of the Lord of glory. It's interesting in this context to note how the Lord Jesus states that in some sense, John 'was Elijah', whereas he himself denies this (Mt. 11:14; 17:12; Mk. 9:13). Such was his humility.

*Baptize... unto repentance*- See note on Mt. 3:3 above. Given that Isaiah 40 offered forgiveness in order to provoke repentance, it could be that the AV translation is correct- although *eis* ["unto"] has a very wide range of meaning. John baptized in order to lead people to repentance, rather than baptizing only those who had repented and got their lives in order.

Even the NET Bible's "baptize... for repentance" could be read the same way- baptism was for the end of provoking repentance, rather than being baptism only for the visibly repentant. This likelihood is strengthened once we realize that there is surely an allusion here to Wisdom 11:23: "You overlook the sins of men, unto repentance". Repentance in any case is an internal attitude (see on 3:6), and John as he stood in the Jordan River was totally incapable of judging whether or not in practice his hearers had actually changed their lives. He baptized them because they had confessed their sins and re-thought, re-pented. Not because they had actually changed in practical, ongoing lifestyle issues. Likewise the apostles who baptized 3000 people in Acts 2 had no way of measuring repentance in practice. Mk. 1:15 records John's message as being: "Repent ye and believe the Gospel". This might seem to be in the wrong order- for we have come to think that surely belief of the Gospel comes before repentance. And so it does very often- but there is another option here- that the repentance is ongoing. Life after conversion is a life of believing the basic Gospel which led us to conversion and repentance in the first place.

*He shall baptize you...* The contrast is between John baptizing unto repentance, and Jesus baptizing with the Holy Spirit. The contrast is between 'repentance' and 'the Holy Spirit'. I suggest that the idea is that the gift of the Holy Spirit would empower repentance and new-mindedness far more than what was achieved by unaided, steel-willed human repentance.

3:12 *Unquenchable fire*- "He (Jesus) shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit (even) with fire: whose fan is in his hand, and... he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Mt. 3:11,12). John put a choice before them: fire, or fire. Either we are consumed with the fire of devotion to God, or we face the figurative fire of condemnation. This is the logic of judgment. John says that the axe is laid to the root of the trees; his hearers were about to be cut down and thrown into the fire of condemnation. And He says that the Jesus whom he heralds is about to come and divide the wheat from the chaff in judgment, gathering in the wheat, and burning the chaff with "unquenchable fire" (Lk. 3:17). But the 'fire' of condemnation and the division of wheat and chaff is to be done ultimately at the Lord's second coming (Mt. 13:30; Mk. 9:48). But for John, the moment his audience met Jesus, they were standing before the Lord of judgment, the Judge of all the earth. In their response to Him, they were living out the final judgment. And this is just as true of us, both as preachers and hearers of the Gospel. The message that the Lord will "burn with unquenchable fire" those who reject Him is described as preaching "good tidings unto the people" (Lk. 3:18 RV). Likewise the stark teaching about the mortality of man in Is. 40 is quoted in 1 Pet. as being the Gospel. The harder side of God is in fact the good news for those who reflect deeply upon the essential message and nature of the Almighty. In Jer. 26:2, Jeremiah is warned to "diminish not a word, if so be..." Israel may repent. His temptation of course was to water down the message which he had to deliver. But only the harder, more demanding side of God might elicit response in them. By making the message less demanding, it wouldn't have any chance of eliciting a response.

3:14 *Answering*- The sensitivity of the Lord is reflected in how He frequently sensed and foresaw human behaviour and objections / response to His teaching and actions. You can read the Gospels and search for examples. Here's a classic one: "But John would have

hindered [Jesus]... but Jesus answering said..." (Mt. 3:14 RV). Jesus 'answered' John's objection even before John had properly expressed it (see another example of this in Lk. 22:70).

*Fulfil all righteousness-* Maybe the Lord Jesus felt that this act of total identification with sinners in their need was necessary for Him to achieve perfect / total righteousness. And He needed John's assistance in this- "it becomes *us*". He was baptized in order to be absolutely perfect, and that perfection involved the act of identification with sinners in order to totally identify with them. Perfection will never be achieved by holding aloof from sinners, but rather by identification with them that they might be saved.

3:16 The reason for Jesus being baptized was surely that He wanted to identify with sinful man, taking His place in the line of mixed up folk waiting on the banks of the Jordan.

*The heavens were opened-* Sometimes God indicates from what perspective the record is written; at other times He doesn't. Thus Matthew 3:16 makes it clear that Christ saw Heaven opened at his baptism, and the Spirit descending like a dove. But Luke 3:21-22 just says that "the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended". Luke doesn't say that this is only what happened from Christ's perspective. This problem of perspective is at the root of the misunderstanding of the demon language in the Gospels.

*Unto Him-* "Unto Him" suggests that only Jesus saw this, although John too saw the dove descending and heard the voice (Jn. 1:33). But He uses the same language in Jn. 1:51: "Hereafter *you* shall see Heaven open, and the Angels of God... descending", just as He had seen the heavens opened and the dove descending upon Him. His sense was that His experience at baptism was in essence to be that of all in Him. This connection lends weight to the idea that His baptism was an act of identification with us, He shared our experience and we are to share His. Likewise the Spirit 'lighted' upon Jesus at His baptism, and the only other time we find this idea is when He promised that although we know not from whence the Spirit 'lights' ["comes"], it will indeed 'light' upon every one that is born of water and Spirit (Jn. 3:8). The same term is used in Acts 19:6, where after baptism the Spirit 'lighted upon' those baptized. Thus the believer's baptism is spoken of in terms reminiscent of the Lord's. He was baptized to set us an example, identifying with us in order to appeal for us to likewise identify with Him.

3:17 *Beloved-* Surely an allusion to Gen. 22:2 (LXX), where the sacrificed Isaac was Abraham's beloved son.

*I am well pleased-* Combining references to Ps. 2:7 and Is. 42:1. Klausner: "In whom I shall be blessed". Quoted about the Lord also in Mt. 12:18; 17:5. The contrast is with how the Father was not "well pleased" with Israel when they were in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:5); but He was well pleased with His Son in the wilderness. Many prophecies about Israel, the 'servant' of Isaiah's prophecies, come true in Jesus. God's plan in Israel failed due to their disobedience, but the intention behind it came true in Jesus; He was the Son who fulfilled the Father's wishes after Israel failed Him. Jesus thus became the embodiment of Israel; He was their representative before God. It is in this context that the representative nature of the Lord

Jesus was first established; He was God's Son who was fully representative of Israel. It is thereby through Him that Israel can be finally restored to their Father.