

*7John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 9Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." 10And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" 11In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." 12Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" 13He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." 14Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."*

*15As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17His 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." 18So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.*

A friend stopped by yesterday. He came into the house all excited. Lynn, have you heard what is happening down by the Jordan River. There is a man named John. Large crowds are gathering to hear him preach. He's like a prophet from long ago, a Jeremiah, an Elijah, a Moses. He's not like all the rabbis and teachers who talk and talk about God but who seem to have never known God. Hundreds of people all stood in silence, listening. Then suddenly the crowd erupted with shouts and cheers.

What I saw next I couldn't believe. Men and women dressed in the latest styles, beggars dressed in rags, wading out into the muddy water one by one to be washed by John. He pushed them down, completely under the water - then pulled them to standing once more. Though their clothing was drenched by the dirty water, John said they were clean, their sins forgiven. Lynn, it is like nothing you've ever seen. I'm going back, will you go with me?

We went together, my friend and I.

As we walked the path toward the river many walked with us. It seemed like the whole area had left work and responsibilities to see what was happening. Even soldiers, I'm sure they were sent out to investigate.

I felt like I was on my way to an Indians' game - everyone rushing along together, hopeful, ready. But just as I came over the last rise of land to see the river, I saw the prophet

standing a way off. As we were all silenced by the sight I heard his angry cry, *“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”*

He was shouting at me, naming me to be among the offspring of the serpent.

Even as in my heart I was protesting, "No, I'm a child of God." I heard his cry. *"Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves we have Abraham as our ancestor; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham."*

I heard his words and I wondered, "Am I like an apple tree with no apples - a child of God who does not live the deeds of God's child?"

John said, "Bear fruit!"

"What fruit am I bearing?" I wondered.

Then he cried, *"Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees, every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."*

*Then someone asked, "What should we do?" and John answered, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise"*

After all that shouting and anger, these words sound so simple. Share. If you have extra give to those who do not have enough. I doing this you will prepare yourself for the coming of the Lord.

John really surprised me when he said that. I expected a more religious answer. Pray three times every day, Give up candy for a period of time, stay away from movies, don't watch TV, give up rock music. But instead: If you have two coats share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.

Tax collectors asked John what they should do, He told them to be honest. Soldiers he told not to abuse their power. John did not call for a lot, only that we be decent and fair, honest with one another, and that we share.

Then suddenly John was talking about something else, not what we should do but what God was going to do.

*"I baptize you with water but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."*

As I heard his words I thought of a great grass fire, racing across the earth burning all that is dead and dry and brittle - a holy wind and fire to prepare for fresh green shoots to come forth.

Have you ever seen where that has happened, from the blackened ash growing the greenest and brightest grass imaginable, fertilized by the very ashes of what had been before?

Then John used a different image, *"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."*

Wheat and chaff, kernel and hull - they are all part of the same plant, one grain containing both. Like me, sin and holiness, good and bad, sharing and greed, lying and truth telling, all fruit from this same tree. John promised the one who would come to separate the chaff from the wheat in me, that I might be gathered into God's granary.

Today John calls not only the crowds from long ago but you and I to repentance. Today is the day to let the Spirit of God burn all that is old and dry and brittle in us. And from that scorched earth God will send forth new shoots of sharing and honesty and gentleness. John is calling us to be like the ones who came to him, not concerned by the appearance of what is outside, but to be cleansed deep within that only fruit worthy of repentance will come from us. In this way we will prepare.

For one other than John is coming but not at all as John expected. He comes not to bring the wrath of God, but the love. He comes to be that love of God for you. Your sin he comes to burn away, but you he will not harm. Your sin will be burned up in forgiveness, and you will be gathered to him, now and forever.