

Warned of the wrath to come

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- [0 : 00] Let us now turn to Matthew chapter 3 verse 7. Matthew chapter 3 and at verse 7.
- But when he, John the Baptist, saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who have warned you to flee from the wrath to come.
- To flee from the wrath to come. Now this John the Baptist was the greatest man who had ever lived up to this time.
- We know that because Christ tells us he says that of all those who were born of a woman, no man ever lived who was greater than John the Baptist.
- So that itself draws our attention to the importance of his life and his message.
- [1 : 25] I suppose if you want an illustration, you could compare this man, John the Baptist, to a shooting star or a meteor.
- one of these wonderful things in the sky that goes from one corner of the heavens right across to the other, full of light in a wonderful blaze and flash.
- That's not just my illustration, it is what Christ himself says about John. Because Christ says this, he, John the Baptist, was a burning and a shining light.
- So he blazed across the sky. In that respect, he's very like Stephen, I think. There was another meteor, if ever there was.
- We've had them in Scotland, Robert Murray Mac Shane, who died at 29 years of age, in his great work in St. Peter's, Dundee, in 1843.
- [2 : 41] was another of these burning and shining lights, these meteoric men. And John the Baptist, I say, was the pattern of them all.
- Now the Bible tells us interesting things about John. It says that he was completely given to his work as a creature.
- He does not appear to have had other occupations, although, of course, it is lawful for a preacher at times to relax, to take rest and exercise.
- But this man, we are told, spent his time in the desert. And there we know what he did. He was in prayer and meditation and fasting, self-denial and preparation.
- His food was the simplest imaginable. He ate locusts and wild honey. You could say his whole life was one long fast, one long self-denial.
- [3 : 56] man. He certainly did not dress in a manner which would suggest that he was a man of fashion. We are told about his dress at verse 4.
- A camel's hair cloak and a leather girdle or belt round his waist. So he was an unusual man.
- A man different from other men. A man separated unto God. We could do with more of that kind of men, couldn't we?

We could do with men who are less like their generation and more completely consecrated to the service of God. We can't help being all stuck at the sheer devotion of this man to God.

God's word. The chapter I read gives you a brief summary of his preaching. The main elements you will be very familiar with.

[5 : 06] For one thing, he preached much about sin. How do I know? Well, it tells us that he preached about repentance.

He preached concerning the need for repentance. repentance. You find that word there. And repentance is nothing more nor less than turning away from sin.

So he made no apology for speaking straight to those who came to hear him. And very many did. All Jerusalem came, and all Judea came, and all the region round about Jordan.

He was evidently an open air preacher of the highest caliber. And these great crowds surrounded him. And this fiery man, this Elijah of the New Testament, if you want to give him that title, he preached about sin and warned of the need of repentance.

That's one element in his preaching. And then he preached about Christ in very beautiful terms. There comes one after me, he said, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear.

[6 : 27] And so he had the highest respect for Christ. We see that at the baptism, which is mentioned toward the end of the chapter. John says to Jesus when he comes to be baptized, no, no, I have need to be baptized by you.

And it's only when Christ explained the necessity for his being baptized by John that he consents. He had the highest honor for Christ in his ministry.

And then, you may not notice this, but he preached also the doctrine of the new birth, the need for conversion. We see that in an interesting phrase.

he says at the end of verse 11, he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire. Or as some of the other gospels have it, I indeed baptize with water, but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire.

And that is a reference, of course, to the new birth, to the absolute necessity of being changed by the power of God in our heart.

[7 : 40] And John preached that message. And then we're told, he also preached the happiness and the safety of all true believers.

There was a perfect balance in this man's ministry. There was no excess of this kind or of that kind. There was a balance. He preached the happiness of Christians, the happiness of believers.

in verse 12. He says, he will gather his wheat into his garner. That is, Christ will.

In the day of judgment, he will gather in all his sheaves. It's a poetical way of referring to believers. Believers are the good grain. The evil ones who don't believe are regarded as the chaff and as the weeds or tares but this is the statement he makes to Christians and about them.

He says, Christ when he comes at the end of the world he will gather in his sheaves. They will get to heaven. All believers will be happy in heaven.

[8 : 49] That's what he means under the illustration of Christ gathering home the wheat into his garner, into his barns, is the phrase we would probably use today.

but then there was this sharp message to those who weren't believers. He urges them to do something and you'll see this at verse seven.

These people called Pharisees and Sadducees they come to him to his baptism and he has something to say to them. Old generation of diaphans, believers, who have warned you to flee from the wrath to come.

So he has this message also for the unconverted and those who were not believers, those who refused the gospel message.

And I want tonight to say something about what he has to say to these persons who are not Christians. flee, he says, from the wrath to come.

[10 : 04] Now that's an urgent message. And the first thing I want to say about that earnest message, an urgent message, is this, that when preachers, when they say this to unconverted people, it is said out of love and out of kindness.

Now preachers, can be misunderstood, just like anybody else. And sometimes when John the Baptist and other preachers speak about the wrath to come, and when they urge sinners to flee, they can be thought to be speaking unkindly.

But I want to show you that that is not the case. Not the case at any rate with John here. people usually dislike this message.

And they tend to say, give me a nice message. Give me a message which is friendly. we have the phrase today, don't we, user-friendly.

And that is something that we are all taught is important, that we show kindness to people and we explain to them that we make them welcome and that we're delighted to see them.

[11 : 30] And we have this phrase, user-friendly. well, that's the way in which we're taught to think today. Or we talk about the feel-good factor.

We should never make people feel upset. That's all psychologically wrong, they say. We must give them the feel-good factor. We must send them away, feeling better than when they came.

Well, now, John apparently knew very little about all that psychology because he doesn't appear to have observed it at all. Perhaps he didn't regard that as his mission or something, but I want to show you that when John the Baptist here said to his hearers that they are to flee from the wrath to come, I would like you to see that that was an extreme kindness that he was showing them.

Nothing he could say to his hearers could possibly be more loving and more kind. Now let me show you why that is so.

It is because of the condition of men, the way men are, the state of men's lives and of their hearts.

[12 : 53] And it's in view of the fact that God is a great God and God is a holy, holy God. That we must in our love and kindness point out to everyone who is not a Christian that there is an urgency about the message of the gospel.

And that's what John in his love and kindness and friendliness to these people was telling them. Flee, he says, flee from the wrath to come.

It is owing to the fact that sinners are so different from God. He is so pure, he is so holy, he is so spotless and immaculate and we sinners are so defiled and evil.

He puts that into his sermon at verse 7 which is really I suppose my text. and this is what he says to them. O generation of vipers.

Now take that for a message. I don't think you could really say that that was user-friendly. You generation of vipers, he says. Now let's consider that for a moment.

[14 : 15] He is there saying that the human heart is like a snake. That's what a viper is, everybody knows that.

A viper is a poisonous snake and a snake which has a deadly bite. If you are bitten by a viper then your chances of survival, if you don't get the serum very quickly and the antidote, are very remote.

The bite of a viper is pernicious, mortal, deadly. sin. Now he uses that because the hearts of sinners without Christ are mortally full of poison.

Our tempers, our words, our anger, our bitterness, and we're all guilty of it.

We've all been guilty of it. It's not one of us can possibly plead that we've never done a third or thought like that. That's how we are. We sting men sometimes with our words.

[15 : 23] We strike them dreadfully with our behavior, sometimes even with our fist. We treat other people like dirt. We say lies about them sometimes.

This is the way sinners are. We are guilty. And you see, therefore, because of the terrible condition of men, their hearts, their tongues, their tempers, that it's only a kind note that they should be told, what John the Baptist says here, that if they are to be right and safe in the end of their life, then they've got something they must do urgently.

They must flee from the wrath to come. That's the first reason why this is a kind note. The second one is this. It's contained in the words at the beginning of my text, where he says, rather at the end of the text, where it says, Who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Now, do you understand what he means by those words? He was talking on this occasion particularly to the Pharisees and to the Sadducees.

Who were they? Well, I'll tell you in a few words. The Pharisees were Jewish traditionalists. And they had this great mistake that they added to the Bible.

[16 : 56] They weren't content with the Bible, they added their own tradition. Jesus was forever telling them that they were making void the commandments of God through their tradition.

That one group and the other group were the very opposite. They weren't traditionalists, they were liberals. These Sadducees were guilty of taking away from Scripture. They rejected most of the books of the Old Testament.

They wouldn't accept them as being inspired. They were the liberals, I say, of that day. They didn't believe in angels, they didn't believe in spirits, they didn't believe in souls, they didn't believe in the body of the resurrection.

So they were really liberals. And they were very religious people in their own understanding of themselves. And this is what Jesus said, Who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Now I'm going to explain what those words almost certainly mean. I put it in the words of William Hendrickson, I think he puts it very well. Hendrickson says this in commenting on these words, Who deluded you into thinking that it is possible to evade God?

[18 : 10] And who has encouraged you to do it? So they thought, you see, these people, that they could evade God.

They thought that their religion alone was sufficient to get them into a state of safety with God. They believed that they could be saved without Christ, merely by their own religion, merely by their own good works.

And that's what everybody thinks, really, except those who are converted. Only those who were born again by the Holy Spirit truly understand that it is not by works that we do, but by faith in Christ that we are able to escape.

But I'm afraid it's born into every sinner's mind to think that we can be saved by our works. And this is what we call a false gospel. And the apostle Paul is extremely strong in the way in which he condemns this false gospel.

Take the words, for instance, in which he's speaking to the Galatians in chapter one of the epistles of the Galatians. He said, if anyone brings you any other gospel than the gospel that I have brought unto you, let him be accursed.

[19 : 44] What I've just said, I say again, even though an angel from heaven brings you any other gospel than the gospel I have brought you, let him be accursed.

And that's you see where these religious figures were going wrong. That's the way all sinners go wrong. They don't understand. And so he says you're trying to escape in the wrong way.

The worst thing imaginable is for people to think they're safe when they are not safe. To think themselves saved when they're not saved.

And so it was in love and kindness that John the Baptist spoke to his hearers on this occasion. You see, no sinner, no sinner at all is safe until he comes to Christ.

And you must ask yourself then tonight, my beloved friend, how you stand in front of this message of John the Baptist.

[20 : 57] Are you trying to evade God? Are you trying to hide from God? Are you trying to escape from him some other way?

Well, the kindest thing that can be said to you with all the love of a preacher's heart, whoever that preacher is, is this, you must flee from the wrath to come.

All right, then, secondly, what's meant with this message where John says, flee. Let's look at the urgency of it. Flee, he says, flee. What does flee mean here?

Well, it means this. If you are fleeing, I think there are three things in it. When you flee, you are running away. Not just simply running, but running away.

Isn't that what it means? Because something is pursuing you, or someone is pursuing you. When you run a race, you don't talk about, in a race, you don't talk about fleeing, you talk about running.

[22 : 04] But if somebody is chasing you, and you're running, you say you run away, or you flee, because there's something pursuing you, there's something after you, something is chasing you.

And the third element is one of danger. There's always a terrible danger that it might catch up with you, before you reach a place of safety.

If you want me just to illustrate it, let me mention a detail of what happened in the Second World War, when the Dam Busters smashed one of those huge dams which the Germans had.

this bouncing bomb that they developed, you remember they dropped a number of them on these reservoirs, and they did so after wonderful practice, they practiced and practiced changing, modifying, developing these bouncing bombs, until they had them to perfection.

They had to put backspin on them, and then these Lancaster bombers had to fly at exactly the right height to drop them. They had a light to the front and a light to the back, light, and when these two lights touched at one single spot, then the engine started and the backspin began, the bomb was dropped, it bounced on the water until it came just right beside the parapet, where the dam was, it sank to the bottom, and the backspin was converted to topspin, and it nestled snugly against the parapet, and then smashed, the whole thing crumbled.

[23 : 41] It was a wonderful piece of genius, the bouncing bomb, the dam busters, but here is one of the sad details, because war is sad. When this bomb broke the dam, the water of course came rushing down, and quite close was a very big road, and a multi-car on the road, and our pilots were looking down and watching, and they saw the water coming closer and closer to this car, and the car saw it coming, and he put his foot down and it raced, raced faster and faster, 80 miles an hour, 90 miles an hour, 100, 110, 120, still the water came on, and the last thing they saw was the lights of the car from being white became green, and then went out.

We know what happened. He was fleeing, but he didn't flee away. Now that's what's therefore told us here. God is angry with the sins of all men, and we are to run to Christ.

That's what's meant by fleeing from the wrath to come. God is angry with men's sins, and we must flee to Christ.

We must run to Jesus. He is the Savior. He is the one whose wings can overshadow us from all the dangers that arise from the wrath of God.

But, here is the danger, we have got to get there in this life. There's no point in hoping that when you get to another world that there might be some chance then of having a second opportunity.

[25 : 35] opportunity. No, no, there are no second opportunities. In this life we must come to Christ. Otherwise, we shall not have escaped from the wrath to come.

So, you see, he tells us this, flee from the wrath to come for very good reasons. This is not hysteria. He is not whipping up some sort of mass hysteria amongst the crowds of Judea and Jerusalem.

He wasn't working some sort of actor's trick upon the people to make them anxious without a good reason. There were the most solid reasons imaginable why his message was right and good and true.

For one thing, he would have said this, that God, God is the best of friends, but God is the worst of enemies.

That is the fact of the matter. There is no friend like God. He is the kindest, most generous, most forgiving of all friends. Ah yes, but that kind God, if you have him as your enemy, he is the most terrible of enemies, the best of friends, the most terrible of enemies.

[26 : 56] And that's what God has shown us in the Bible. that's why we have the book of Genesis telling us about the flood. You see, these people, they didn't flee from the wrath to come.

They should have entered in, shouldn't they, into Noah's ark. He went in, and his wife, and the other sons, and their three wives, all eight of them went in, and the animals, and birds, and whatnot, and then the door was shut.

Then they were. These others should have gone in, too. They were invited in. Noah preached to them for all those hundred and twenty years, but they didn't listen. And you see, God, who was so friendly and so kind, warning them, urging them, begging them, if you like, through the mouth of this preacher, eventually, when they made him their enemy, he came down like a ton of bricks, and swept them all away.

The same is true at Sodom and Gomorrah. You see, it illustrates exactly the same lesson. If people will not flee from the wrath to come, then the anger will come upon them.

You can't have it both ways. You can't live the life of a sinner and get away with it, because God is the sort of God that he will not tolerate unpunished sin.

[28 : 22] He may not punish it today or tomorrow morning, he may not punish it by Tuesday even, or Wednesday, but sooner or later, every unpardoned sin is going to be punished.

The only reason why Christian sins are not punished is because they have been punished in Christ, on the cross, and that makes all the difference.

Now, notice the phrase that John the Baptist uses here. He doesn't simply say, flee from the wrath of God, although that would have been true.

He says, flee from the wrath to come. Wrath is simply anger. Wrath, if you want to, the English pronunciation, whatever pronunciation you want to use, it's the same thing, the anger of God.

And, what he says then is, that this wrath, or wrath, is coming. It's the wrath to come. It's not here yet.

[29 : 26] We've never seen it. Not in the history of the world has this anger of God been fully displayed. Oh yes, it was at the flood, and the Tower of Babel, and Sodom, and so on, but only a small bit of it, just a little.

But he says, the wrath that is to come, is so much more dreadful than anything that has ever happened in the history of the world, that it is unimaginably dreadful, the wrath to come.

When Christ returns, we have pictures of it in the book of Revelation chapter 6, if you've never read it, then go home and read it. Revelation 6 speaks about the wrath to come.

When sinners would rather have the mountains fall on their heads, and so on, then suffer this wrath to come. Now, why does John the Baptist make this stern, urgent appeal to them, to flee from the wrath to come?

I've already said to you it's out of love and out of kindness, but let me go on to say there's another reason too, it's because people are so slow to take God's word for it.

[30 : 39] People are terribly slow, and I wouldn't be at all surprised if even as I'm speaking now, some of you are preparing your ironing for tomorrow morning, some of you are working out what your homework will be for tomorrow night, and others of you will be thinking about some other aspect of your earthly life.

Well, my dear friend, if that's what you're thinking about, let me most respectfully urge you to consider the seriousness of this message for your life, because, you see, we're all so slow to believe what God has said.

Oh, that you might be persuaded. Oh, that you might be convinced that there is such a thing as this wrath to come. It's rather like Lot in Genesis 19 when he was warned by the angel of the fire that God was going to pour down upon the cities of the plain, Sodom and Gomorrah and all the others, the two others, and we're told that when Lot heard about this message, instead of running and fleeing, we're told he lingered, he loitered.

No, no, he said, let me stay a little bit longer. Flee, said the angel, flee. No, said Lot, there's no particular hurry, is there? And that's the way we are, you see.

We don't believe God. Oh, my friends, it is true what the apostle Paul and John the Baptist and all the writers of scripture have said.

[32 : 17] We don't have too long in our lifetime to flee to Christ for safety. It's rather like what happened in the Mediterranean in the last few days of this week.

You will have noticed that there was a liner, some sort of luxury liner or cruise vessel was carrying its cargo of passengers in the Mediterranean. And what happened?

A fire broke out in the engine room. And they had to evacuate the ship. Down went the lifeboats. Women and children first, men next, and thankfully they got them all to safety as far as I have heard.

What a mercy. But you see, they had to do what they were told. When the bells sound on the boat, you don't have to stand there asking questions. When the siren goes saying emergency to the muster stations, you think that people would be crazy if they kept on filling in their crossword puzzle, or dealing out their cards around the table as they were playing their games.

People would be mad if they didn't listen to the warning bell on the liner. So they have to go to their muster stations and they have to get into the lifeboat. Women and children first and men next.

- [33 : 34] We have to take seriously what God is saying. The terrible fact is, men and women are very good at making excuses for themselves.

You know, one excuse is this. They say, I can't believe all this. God is love. Well, it is true, my dear friend, God is love. But you know, if we disobey God, then he won't be a God of love to us.

He'll be a God of love to his people. But if we disobey the gospel and despise what he says in his word to flee from the wrath to come, then you won't enjoy any of that love.

The love is only for those who believe in Christ and come to put their trust in Christ. Then there's another excuse people use. Oh, they say, there's plenty of time.

I'm only quite young. I'm only 46 or 55 or something. Plenty of time. But you realize, my very dear friends, that we have no time to waste.

- [34 : 49] That is one of the saddest lessons, surely, you would agree with me that has come to our attention in the last tragic month since the untimely death of that beautiful and most famous princess.

How in a moment all our hopes are changed. How in a moment all that we had in this world of riches and fame goes.

It's true for kings and commoners, for rich and poor, for old, even for the most handsome, even for the most popular.

We, none of us know the day or the hour. And that's why, you see, it's love to say to sinners, flee from the wrath to come. Oh, but, says somebody, I never did anyone any harm.

Now, there are people who think that about themselves. They say, I never did anyone any harm. The great question is, did you ever do anyone any good? Oh, how a faithful man this John the Baptist is.

- [36 : 01] What a faithful man. All right, then, thirdly and finally, what are sinners to do so as to flee from the wrath to come?

You can't hide under the table. you can't run out of the door. What is required of you? Now, those of you who are serious about the things of God, those of you who long to know this peace and safety with the Savior, allow me just a moment before I close to say to you, what is meant and what you are required to do in order to flee from the wrath to come.

Well, it's the Gospel's way of saying several things. I'm going to bring four things before you. First of all, it means that we are both to believe and also to repent.

You'll see that this is very clearly the message of John. Bring forth at verse 8, bring forth therefore fruits meet or suitable for repentance.

Repentance. So, he was very strong on this point. he was very insistent on the need for repentance as well as faith. There is no salvation by faith unless there's also repentance.

- [37 : 24] Do we know that? If I were to say to you that you can believe and then live in any old way, then I'm telling you a lie.

You see, he says this, bring forth fruits meet for repentance. repentance. So, there has to be repentance as well as faith. What is repentance? It means stop doing those wicked things that you have been doing.

Stop living that wicked life. Going to those wicked places, doing those wicked things, reading those wicked books, watching those wicked programs.

Stop it. Repent of it. Turn your back upon it. Every single thing in which there's a filthiness and a wickedness, every single thing which is wrong and your conscience tells you it's wrong, turn your back upon it.

Repentance. That's the first element. And it goes, of course, always together with faith. You know, when I speak to older Christians all over the country, this is what they say to me.

[38 : 35] they say, there's not so many saints nowadays. We used to have many great examples of Christian saintliness when we were young Christians.

There's not so many now. You'll find that Christians all over the country are saying that. And of course it's connected with this repentance that I'm beginning with here. Oh friend, study to be an excellent Christian.

Study to be the best Christian on earth. The best Christian who ever lived. Don't stick at the least degree of grace. Repentance is the way to excellence.

Now the second thing you want to do, it says is this, if you are to flee from the wrath to come, people need to live as they profess their faith in Christ.

Verse 8, bring forth fruits, meat for repentance. that means live a life which is as good as what you say you believe.

[39 : 43] Well, none of us quite reach that, I'm afraid. But at least we must strive to do. We must not only profess Christianity, but we must live it out.

Putting it in simple speech, it means the consistent life. now sadly that's not always the case. We can meet with those who profess quite a lot, but is their life consistent with it?

Is that what you see in their life? Oh, they say it, but is not the way they live it? Well, says John, there must be no discrepancy between the two.

The third thing is this, it will do us no good to be born into a Christian family unless we ourselves become converted people.

We see that very clearly in verse 11. Verse 9, let me read it. Think not to say within yourselves that we have Abraham to our father. I say to you that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.

[40 : 52] What does it mean? Well, you see, these Pharisees and so on, they were glorying in the fact that they were Abraham's children. They thought they were safe because they had come into Abraham's family.

Now, if you have a godly father or a godly mother, it will do you no good at all unless you become godly yourself.

That's what John is making clear. We must ourselves become godly. God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. He means the hardest hearted.

He means the very drug addicts out there and the drunkards out there and the wife beaters out there and the foul mouth. God is able to make these wicked people into shining Christians, these stones, as it were.

And if you and I despise the word of God, then he will shame us by bringing in converts from out there that will be like the stones converted.

[41 : 58] And then the fourth thing, as I draw to my conclusions of verse 11, much more is needed than baptism. Much more is needed than baptism. I baptize with water, but he says he, that is Jesus, baptizes with the Holy Ghost and with fire.

fire. And there are people who think that because they have been baptized, they're alright. Not at all, says John. We need to have this fire in our soul, the fire of the love of God, the fire of faith, the fire of fellowship, the fire of grace, because that's what the Holy Spirit does.

He creates love and faith and grace and fellowship with other Christians and supremely with God himself. Oh, my friends, it is said about Christians that they have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before them.

That's what Christians have done. All Christians are safe. John the Baptist makes that clear. All the Bible makes it clear. And with the tenderest, most loving entreaty, as I close my sermon tonight, I ask all of you to consider your need to flee from your sin and from the wrath to Jesus.