

Luke 3:1 - Divine Visitations

by Richard Owen Roberts

Revival is a spiritual awakening that occurs among the living, where individuals or communities experience a renewed sense of God's presence and power, leading to a deeper commitment to faith and a transformed life.

Duration: 1:43:01

Scripture: Luke 3:9-10, Luke 3:16

Topics: "Repentance", "Sanctification"

Description

This sermon based on Luke chapter 3 focuses on the importance of preparing the way for the Lord by bearing fruits in keeping with repentance. John the Baptist emphasizes the need for humility, honesty, integrity, and contentment in various aspects of life. The sermon highlights the significance of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire, symbolizing power, purity, and passion in the believer's life. It challenges individuals to believe in the finished work of Christ, leading to sanctification and a life marked by holiness and zeal for God.

Transcript

Luke chapter 3, the gospel of Luke, third chapter, I'll begin reading in verse 1. Now in the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Iteria, and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene. In the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. And he came into all the district around Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make ready the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Every ravine will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be brought low. The crooked will become straight, and the rough roads smooth, and all flesh will see the salvation of God. So he began saying to the crowds who were going out to be baptized by him, you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, we have Abraham for our father.

For I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. Indeed, the ax is already laid at the root of the trees. So every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

And the crowds were questioning him, saying, then what shall we do? And he would answer and say to them, the man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and he who has food is to do likewise. And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, teacher, what shall we do? And he said to them, collect no more than what you have been ordered to. Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, and what about us? What shall we do? And he said to them, do not take money from anyone by force or accuse anyone falsely and be content with your wages.

Now, while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John as to whether he was the Christ, John answered and said to them all, as for me, I baptize you with water. But one is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

His winnowing fork is in his hand to thoroughly clear his threshing floor and to gather the weed into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. May the Lord add his blessings to the reading, also to the hearing, and in a few moments to the preaching of his word as well. I am incredibly grateful that this is the Lord's day, not the Lord's hour.

And knowing at least some of you and of your hearts, I shall not be in a great hurry. And I won't feel any constraint of time. Now, these are immensely important days, both for us and our purpose in being together, with a focus on revival.

Now, I know that there are an awful lot of people who don't really have any distinct notion at all what revival really is. If I thought revival was what a lot of people I meet think revival is, I'd be home resting today. But by God's grace, I know what revival is, and it is so desperately needed.

And God is so perfectly able. And revival itself comes with such suddenness that no matter what we know about the condition of our own hearts and the condition of the church in America and the tragic moral and spiritual decline of a once godly nation, I know that suddenly God can come and everything can be transformed. And so I'm perfectly delighted to be here and to speak on this theme and particularly grateful that my dear and longtime friend John Snyder will be coming in late tonight.

And so we'll share these meetings together. Now, if my memory is any good at all, I think this is my third visit to this fellowship. And I remember with great fondness the former visits.

And I'm very glad that some have come from other parts. Right here immediately in front of me is a friend of mine, Patrick, who lives in my area. And he and his roommate and friend, Apollos, have been a great help to me physically in things I could not do.

He's been a part of one of our Bible classes there as well. So I look across the room as best I can and I greet you in the name of Jesus. And I ask you now to give all you've got to the listening, to the word of God, which is as it always was, living, powerful, able to radically transform.

Now, for those who don't really have any clear-cut notion of what true revival is and of how wonderfully it does transform and how magnificently it brings glory to its author, let me begin with a few simple explanatory thoughts. There are two words that are often used interchangeably to describe revival. The words revival and awakening.

And sometimes gatherings like this are called awakening conferences. The ministry that I'm privileged to work under is called the International Awakening Ministry. It is a revival ministry.

Not big, not important, not even very useful, but the best that we can do. And sometimes made genuinely useful by God himself. But what's the difference between those two terms? Is it wrong to use them interchangeably? And just as a point of reference, there was that wonderful movement that began both in England, the United Kingdom in actuality, and America at pretty much the same time.

The movement that began approximately 1732. In Great Britain, it became known as the Evangelical Revival. But here in America, it earned the title the First Great Awakening.

Are the words identical? Could we say that there really is no distinction between them? Now, mind you, I'm not making a fuss about a non-essential. Just simply asking you to join now in a serious consideration of this subject. Revival technically is only possible among the living.

How can you revive that which has always been dead? Not really a brilliant thought, but a very critical thought. So, when we speak with great care, revival is that which pertains to those who have some measure of the life of God in them. And some of you are acquainted with the proverb, the proverb concerning backsliding.

The proverb that says, the backslider in heart is filled again with his own ways. Now, let's think about that proverb and the great truth that it speaks of. When a person is dead in trespasses and in sin, God himself regenerates that person, brings that dead person, that person dead in trespasses and in sins to life.

And the person who was filled with himself is gloriously emptied of self and filled with Christ. That's why some backsliding Christians aren't very interested in being around new converts. Because new converts are full of joy and the backslider is not.

They're full of vitality and life and the backslider is not. They have an immense burden to share Christ with everybody they know and the backslider does not. There are churches that say concerning new converts, don't worry, in a few days time we'll have them down to our level.

One of the greatest sources of tension in a typical church is new converts, who make everybody else uncomfortable. But after being emptied of self and filled with Christ, gradually, bit by bit, piece by piece, self once again comes back. When you're truly born of God, you hate self in sin and you love Christ.

And your enthusiasm is impressive. But then you begin to have a renewed attraction to that which you left. And if you're not careful, every single believer is in danger of backsliding, of having the self return.

I have illustrated it in some places. Some may have heard me use this before. Did you ever ride a subway, say in New York or London? Well, you board the subway car and you see that entire car with seats along both sides and then straps constantly all along overhead.

You see there is one single seat left and you grab it. And I'm talking about a continual bench. And when I say one seat, I mean a room enough for a person about my size.

So the car takes off and you come into the next station and the doors open and here's one of these great fat New York women. And she spots about an inch and a quarter between you and the person next to you. And you see she's headed your way.

Oh no! And she manages to sit down in that tiny place and like this, she's got plenty of room. And at the next stop, it's one of those Irish policemen. You get the picture.

You leave a tiny crack in your life, the smallest space, and sin seeks to find its way in. And a sin serves like a magnet. It draws other sins.

And so the backslider in heart is filled again with his own ways. Christ is crowded off into a corner. Now mind you, I'm not talking silly.

I'm not talking about the absurdity of a saved person being lost. That's nonsense. How can you be saved and lost? If you're lost, you're lost.

If you're saved, you're saved. But you can have sin and self crowd back into your life and rob you of joy and render you useless and so a revival comes. Comes.

And this person who has backslidden is suddenly, once again, gloriously emptied of self and filled with Christ. And there's a factor in revival so precious, so wonderful, that it's a kind of an experience that is never forgotten. In my younger years, I was often a guest preacher in various parts of the Principality of Wales, a land that saw dozens of magnificent revivals over the years.

The last great revival gripping Wales in 1904, 1905. And as a young man preaching in the churches of Wales, I often met those who were deeply... Can you imagine what I'm talking about? Those who were deeply affected by the revival. Old people, of course, but just some precious quality there.

Something glorious had happened that could not be forgotten and that had magnificent impact year after year after year. And meeting them at their 70 and 80 and 90 years of age, still the glow of the presence of Christ that came to them in revival. Wonderfully in place.

So revival, that which happens among the living who have backslidden. Is there anyone here who needs revival? But revival and awakening and in the glorious plan of God, those two work together. As I've said, they are sometimes used interchangeably and I'm not trying to argue against that.

What is, is. But nonetheless, though they are used interchangeably, there is a distinct difference between the two. When there is a revival in the church, it leads to an awakening in the world.

Now, I listen to people who say, it's too late. My word, things are so terrible, there is no hope. The next event on God's calendar is the end of the world.

Well, that might be. But who are they to say? How do they know God's calendar? I'll tell you the bulk of the people who talk a lot about millennialism are liars. They pretend to know more than Christ does.

When Christ was asked, when shall these things be? He made it clear, that's in the Father's hands, not mine. But suppose we are nowhere near the end. Suppose the end of the year of the age is still 500 years away.

If we live like those, and think like those, who are sure the end has come, we'll just satisfy ourselves with the rotten state of our souls, and with the precarious state of the nation. How much better, how much better to believe God for an awakening. In the world, that accompanies a revival in the church.

The records of history are so glorious, they must not be overlooked, because my family came from the principality that I've already mentioned. I have a natural inclination of interest in that little land. Some of you know that throughout history, there are only two nations who have been regularly described as the land of revival.

The Principality of Wales, and the United States of America. But in 1904, although the churches of the land had seating capacity for just about the entire population, many of the seats were empty, and multitudes of Welsh people had forsaken both Christ and the church. But then, in the glorious providence of God, Christ was suddenly there, in the midst of the people.

The churches were packed, the policemen were essentially out of work. Judges, with great frequency, would enter the courtroom, and they would lay a pair of white gloves, and that pair of white gloves signified nothing on the docket. Not a single case to be tried.

The policemen, as I said, essentially out of work, organized themselves into gospel quartets, and went around singing in the churches and in the taverns. I mean, nothing happening in the tavern, and nobody buying alcohol. There were football games that might have normally 10,000 people in attendance, and at the time the event was scheduled, maybe only three out of the two teams would show up.

And the rest of the people were in church, or in their homes, seeking God. The situation became so amazing that the really only work the policemen had beside their music was crowd control. There was the danger, because the immense numbers of people crowding into the churches, that the balconies would collapse.

And so the police had to be on hand to be sure that the crowds didn't crush. The building. And I think one of the most delightful aspects of the whole Welch, or Wales, being very much a mining country in the southern part, coal mines.

The ponies down in the bowels of the earth, the donkeys that drew the ore carts as a direct result of the revival, went on strike. The miners would go down in the shafts on the lifts, and then walk along the vein to where their donkey was. And for years, these donkeys had been driven with kicks and with curses.

But now, during the revival, the donkey or the miner comes down the shaft, moves gaily along to the place where the animals are kept, puts his arm around his pony, and says, now pony dear, we're here to serve the Lord Christ. Let's begin with a psalm and a prayer. And the poor animals were dreadfully confused, didn't know what to do.

They had to be retrained to humankind. Don't tell me it's too late. Every tavern in America could be closed tomorrow morning, and forever in our lifetime, if Christ were to come.

Revival in the church, and awakening in the world. Now, there is another term that is sort of the cover term. Of those two terms, I've briefly explained.

It's a wonderful term. I'm a guest in the home of Luke and Megan. They've been married, they told me, three months.

And last night, they said to me, you are our first house guest. They are experiencing a visitation. Now, I could imagine a thousand persons whom they might better have entertained, but they've got me.

And I am their first house guest. But you know what the word visitation means. Now, you know that sometimes people come and you wish they didn't.

And when they leave, you breathe a great sigh of relief. Am I grateful that's over. But on the other hand, some of us look forward for weeks and months to visitation.

And we treasure the memories of the visitation. I think back over my lifespan. And I think with wonderful joy of the guest whom we've entertained in our home.

Let's think together about that word and the impact of it. The word visitation. And we're focusing not upon the visitation of a parent or an uncle or a friend, but a divine visitation.

Now, we read together from the Gospel of Luke, chapter three. If you're one of those silly people that thinks preachers shouldn't talk for more than 25 minutes, I haven't even started and I've broken your rule. But just in asking for the milk of human kindness, I haven't preached yet.

I've just had a friendly chat. And now we turn to the word and the sermon began. So if you have this nasty spirit and you time the preacher, don't count what went before.

Punch your watch now if you like. But Luke, chapter three, a wonderful passage on the subject of divine visitation. Now, this is a passage, obviously, about two people.

The next to greatest and the greatest. The greatest of all, Christ. And in Christ's lifetime, other than himself, the next greatest, John the Baptist.

So this is a passage telling us about the call of John the Baptist to prepare the way for the divine visitor. The Lord Jesus Christ. And what we'll really be talking about all week is making ready the way of the Lord.

Now, I don't know some of you at all and not any of you well enough to be absolutely sure of all these things, but I want to tell you that in the course of life, I've had many wonderful things that have happened. But the greatest of all has been the nearness of Christ. Indeed, I can add my testimony to that of the psalmist in Psalm 73.

The nearness of God is my good. Of all the high points of my life, none have approached in greatness and value. Those seasons when the nearness of Christ has been my lot.

Now, having said that, some of you may be quite stupid about spiritual things. And you may have the notion that God is always near. Now, just in case someone here is so dumb as to think like so much of the church does, that God is always near, let me remind you of a statement made by the apostle James.

Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Now, if God is always near, that's an absurdity. Why should anyone be instructed to draw near and God will draw near himself when God is always near? We've got to face the fact that our present age is an age in which God has drawn away, not drawn near.

Now, look, God gave you a brain, use it. How did we become a nation of great wickedness? How did the churches of the nation earn the reputation of being virtually worthless? Was it by the nearness of God? No, obviously, it's by the absence of God. Now, a lot of well-meaning people misinterpret scripture.

And some of you are already well acquainted with what I'm about to say in introducing this matter of divine visitations. But some of you are unlettered in these things. When we speak of the presence of God with biblical wisdom, we speak in three different realms.

We speak, number one, of God's essential presence, number two, of God's manifest presence, and number three, of God's cultivated presence. Now, God is holy, and he has a very great abhorrence of that which is unholy. And he refuses to be part of that which is unholy.

So God is never near the unholy. And he does not link himself with the unholy church. He distances himself from the unholy church.

Now, what a goodly number of sincere but disilluded people are telling us is God is always with us. They use such expressions as, Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age. Or, I will never leave you nor forsake you.

Now, those are very valid truths. But they speak about God's essential presence. If you haven't gotten this straight, you need to.

Where is God? Well, he's everywhere. In his essential presence, he is here this morning. But while he is here, he is also in the deepest den of iniquity anywhere in the world.

Now, how old are you? He's five, just ideal age. You know what a rocket is? How would you like for your parents and I to put you on a rocket tomorrow morning and to shoot you out into space? No. What if your dad went with you? Oh, that's all right.

God made us all different. How about you? No? Well, all right. You'll have to imagine it then.

I thought we had a subject, but we don't. But imagine now, you send a fellow out into space. He travels outward for 10,000 years.

And I ask you this simple question. Does he ever pass a place where God is not? No. God fills heaven and earth.

But what is the impact of God's essential presence upon society? Well, never here, of course. But I've been in churches that are so busy fighting with one another that they don't have any time for God. Now, when God draws near to a church, you know what happens? People fall on their faces.

They weep. They cry out such things as, whoa, it's me. I am undone.

I'm a man of unclean lips. I'm a man of impure heart. Depart from me.

I'm not worthy. The essential presence of God has virtually no known impact upon the moral and the spiritual life of its observer. Now, that's not eliminating God's essential presence.

That's meaning that it's simply qualifying what it really means. But now, the second term, the manifest presence. Manifest.

Now, this boy sat next to me. He was courageous in doing so, and I'm glad he had the courage. Now, it's going to be hard for him to deny tonight that an old man didn't come up right next to him, put his arm on his shoulder, and give him a bit of a back rub.

This boy has had a manifestation of my presence. It wasn't just visual. It was felt.

The manifest presence of Christ is a felt presence. You know. You know that he has come.

Now, you sense his being right immediately with you, and it troubles you because you know how unfit you are, how unworthy, how unlike Christ. And you, too, join with those recorded in Scripture who cry out, having fallen on their faces, woe is me. I am undone.

And when we're talking about divine visitations, we're not talking about the essential presence of Christ, but the manifest presence of Christ. But I mentioned the third word, and I'll just give a few statements about it. Because of God's nature, because of his holiness, because of his hatred of sin, because of his refusal to have anything intimate to do with sinners, God brings the church, when it prefers sin over holiness, under judgment.

And the greatest feature of the judgment of God--and by the way, I'm not speaking about some judgment in the future, but I'm speaking about the judgment that occurs concurrent with sin. And let me speak specifically and say, these United States of America are under God's judgment. Don't be so silly as to say, if we're not careful, God may judge us.

God has judged us. He has judged us by withdrawing his manifest presence. Now, if you don't care anything about the nearness of God, you don't even breathe a sigh of concern when he's left you.

But when you're walking in my shoes--now, I don't want to make an issue of this, but I have been preaching for 70 years, a good deal longer than many of you have been alive. And I have preached at times when God was so near that entire congregations were bathed in tears and where large numbers were fleeing to Christ. I know the difference between a season when God is near and a season when God has withdrawn.

And what I'm saying to you now is, there is that wonderful privilege of cultivating God's presence. While living in a nation under the judgment of God, when he has withdrawn his manifest presence from the churches of the land, it is still possible for individuals and local churches to cultivate God's presence, to enjoy the presence of God even when others are suffering from his absence. So I want to underline that and say there is no way we can guarantee that God will visit us again as a nation, but every one of us, without exception, has the privilege of cultivating God's presence and enjoying it.

Now, keep those simple matters in mind. As I told you to begin with, this is the Lord's Day. I'm not in a hurry.

I hope you aren't. And if you are, well, God can forgive. He won't until you ask for it.

But now we do come at last to the passage, and what I have said I think is essential to really getting a grip on the wonderful truths before us. As Anthony read for us, out of Luke 3, in the 15th year of Tiberius, and then the assortment of names and positions, and verse 2, in the high priesthood of Ananias in Caiaphas, the word of God came to John. And as I have been stressing, this is a passage on divine visitations, just to help you to get a better sense of the biblical issue involved here.

Go back in your thinking to what you can remember about the Old Testament. Remember that occasion when Moses approached a bush that was burning, and yet it was not destroyed? And when God spoke out of that bush and commanded Moses to take off his sandals, because he was standing on holy ground. That was a divine visitation.

Then when God sent Moses to confront Pharaoh, and when Pharaoh refused to let the people go, and God sent that series of plagues upon Egypt, a divine visitation, over and over and over in the Old Testament, there are divine visitations. We have a special term, it's not very commonly used, I'm not even sure I can pronounce it rightly. Paul, you correct me if I'm wrong, an epiphany.

Times of visitation, normally brief, but very real in Scripture. But then, we had the visitation of a very different sort, and it's this other visitation that this third chapter of Luke focuses upon, the coming of Christ in his incarnation. And so the duty of John the Baptist, in particular, is to prepare the way of the Lord.

But then in addition to the visitation, when Christ became incarnate, and was both God and man, we have the visitation of God at Pentecost, and what a glorious visitation that was. And then throughout history, these glorious divine visitations, I described ever so briefly that visitation to the principality, when one-tenth of the entire population was gloriously converted, and multitudes of backsliders restored to the fullness of life in Christ. A transforming visitation upon the little land of my forebear.

And our own country, these great seasons of divine visitation, and what we're saying today is, it's not too late. Have you thought of what it would be like if Christ visited us again? Oh, dear me, what a lovely thought. What a glorious thing to think of this wayward, backslidden, grievously wicked nation, suddenly filled with the presence of God.

Divine visitation, glorious events of the past, and anticipated event of the present, and a guaranteed event of the future, for Christ will come back. Absolutely guaranteed. No possibility of it otherwise.

What we sometimes refer to as the second coming, or the second advent, when Christ comes back and demonstrates that he is truly the Lord of all, and not one can resist. Even the worst infidel in the world is forced to bow the knee and admit that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. But I don't want the infidel to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ when it's too late to do him any good.

I want him to make that admission now. And that's what we're talking about when we're talking about revival and awakening, a visitation in the here and the now, when the knee bows and the heart and the spirit are broken, and Christ is truly acknowledged. But now let me remind you of an event that is recorded in chapter one of Luke.

Some of you are well familiar with this. Perhaps others of you have not made the connection. But go back, if you will, to Luke one, and let me call your attention to that portion beginning at verse 13.

And I remind you, and this is explained in what is immediately before verse 13, that Zacharias, a priest, was in the temple performing his normal responsibilities at that time. And at verse 13, the angel said to him, do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear a son, and you will give him the name John, and you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb, and he will turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God.

And it is he who will be a forerunner before him in the spirit and in the power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. And you well know that exactly as the angel declared it to Zacharias, his aged wife, past childbearing years, suddenly found herself pregnant. Not in the miraculous way that Mary was impregnated with that living and abiding word, but in a natural way made possible through a miracle.

And all of you, I trust, remember that after some months, and this same angel had made a visit to a young girl by the name of Mary and told her that she was to bear a child, although never having known a man, and in her amazement, and then in great joy, she went to call upon her cousin Elizabeth, and as she was

approaching the home, she called out a greeting, and that babe in Elizabeth's womb leapt, and both Elizabeth and John were filled with the Holy Spirit before ever he was born. So the precise words of the angel came true in every detail. And you know that because Zacharias had a problem with what the angel told him, he was struck dumb, and he could not speak.

And you do remember, don't you, that at the time of the naming of the child, there was a discussion among the family as to what this child was to be called. This is also in Luke 1. If you've forgotten, you will find the record beginning at verse 68. And after this discussion about what the child was to be called, John wrote on a tablet, or I mean Zacharias wrote on a tablet, his name is John, and his tongue was unleashed.

And he gave a wonderful testimony of what this boy was to accomplish. Look, as I said, at verse 68. His father, and verse 37, 67, Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he prophesied, saying, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited us.

Let that word warm your heart. He has visited us and accomplished redemption for his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David his servant, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, salvation from our enemies, and from the hands of all who hate us, to show mercy toward our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant, the oath which he swore to Abraham our father, to grant us that we be delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go on before his people, before the Lord to prepare his way, to give to his people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercies of our God, with which the sunrise from on high shall visit us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Will you let that phraseology rip your heart? The sunrise from on high shall visit us. We are in a world that sits in darkness, and the darkness is engulfing the church itself. But imagine now, the sunrise from on high visiting us, Christ himself, in our midst, the brightness of his glory lighting every dark heart and every dark corner.

Now Paul heard John's duty was to prepare the way of the Lord. So let us now focus on the quotation that appears here in Luke chapter 3, that deals with this duty that was assigned John. We have this quotation starting at verse 4, as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah, the prophet.

The voice of one crying in the wilderness, make ready the way of the Lord, make his path straight, every ravine shall be filled up, every mountain shall be brought low, the crooked shall become straight, the rock way smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God. Now we know it's absolutely guaranteed that that will happen in the end, but that prediction from Isaiah was something to happen as a result of the preparation of the way of the Lord that was made in the days of John the Baptist. And I'm here to tell you we have the privilege of right here and right now in our hearts, in this assembly together, preparing the way of the Lord.

And what if it's in God's heart to let the sunrise from on high visit us in this very place, and to lighten the whole of this dark land. Now look, there's a reality we must not overlook. God always keeps his word.

Now look, we have a promise in Romans chapter 11, that before the end, the Jews will be provoked to jealousy by the Gentile church. And as a result of that jealousy, they will come flocking to Christ. Now if you want to be stupid, you can move that into some millennium age.

But I don't see any reason to be stupid, unless you're born that way, which you were and yet you weren't. God gave every one of us a brain and a heart, and we can rightly interpret the word. Now think about what I just said.

The promise of Romans 11, that the Jew will be provoked to jealousy. By the Gentile church. That has never happened.

There's absolutely no record anywhere of that having occurred. It must still take place. And it's not easy to envision.

I mean, it's not difficult to envision. It's very easy. You know the record.

God chose Israel. But he gave them promises that were if promises. I will do this if.

I will do this if. They chose to disobey. And in the course of time, they lost their way.

I've been leading a study in Wheaton on Jeremiah, and we're coming to grips with some amazing truths in that study. But we all know that God said it is over for Israel. And they were carried away into captivity.

And they lost out on the promises that were given to them if they would obey. And they would not. And so, not long after Jeremiah's season as a prophet, Israel was carried away into Babylonian captivity.

And that was followed by a 400 year of absolute silence when God did not speak. Or if he did, there's no record of it. And then the angel appears to Zacharias and gives this glorious vision of the sunrise from on high visiting.

And the Jews to whom Jesus came in Jerusalem declared him a maniac and hung him on a tree. He came to his own. And his own received him not, but to as many as received him.

Gave he the power to become the sons of God who were born not of the will of man, not of the will of flesh, but of God. And then the Gentile church is raised up. And we are the recipients of that incredible season.

When the natural branch Israel was cut off and the unnatural branch Gentiles crafted in. And for hundreds and hundreds of years, we have been part of the vine. But it is absurd to think that we can act like Israel and remain.

And so the promise is when the Gentile church is so gloriously arrayed in the beauty of Christ, the Jews will look and say, that's not fair. He's our Messiah. Why should they have all the benefits which were intended for us? They're provoked to jealousy.

And they come by great masses to the feet of Christ. Now look, you say, God doesn't need America to accomplish that. I agree with you.

But I ask you, in what nation is found the largest number of Jews of any nation in the world? These United States. I'll tell you how I think. I think of my beloved nation experiencing the visitation of the sunrise from on high.

I see a stupid, dreadfully backslidden, a nearly dead church revived. I see an awakening happening in my world. I see the church that I know so well across America, arrayed in the robes of their own

unrighteousness, suddenly closed with the beauty of Christ's righteousness.

And I can almost feel in my old bones the spirit of the Jew crying out, that's not fair. He's our Messiah. Why should they have all these blessings? Once in a while, somebody asks me, aren't you thinking about retirement? No, I'm thinking about the sunrise from on high, visiting us.

That's why I'm here. I'm not the sunrise. I know that as well as you do.

But I knew who the sunrise is, and I know how much he would love to turn us into that virgin bride, and how much he would love to provoke his ancient people, Israel, to jealousy. And as long as God fills my heart with such truth and gives me enough strength to limp along, I'll do what I can. But we've got to take seriously these words that John quotes.

Look at these words again from a very personal standpoint. Ask honestly now concerning yourself, have I made ready the way of the Lord? Have I made his paths straight? Have I filled in every low place? Have I brought down every high place? Have I straightened out every crooked way? Have I made the rough roads smooth? For I know that if the way of the Lord is prepared, all flesh shall see the glory of the Lord. I'm asking you to take God seriously.

You say, I'm not really quite sure what's meant by that flow of words. Sounds wonderful. Well, think.

That's why God so kindly gave you that excellent brain and gave you the heart to embrace and to act upon his truth. What will it mean for you to do precisely what is called for here? This is not an exclusive task of John the Baptist. This is a task for everyone who longs to see the promise of God fulfilled, longs to see Jews in vast numbers fleeing to Christ.

How I meet professed Christians who hate Jews, I want to tell you I love them. I long to see them knowing the same Savior I love. What must I do? What must you do to prepare the way of the Lord? What will it mean for you to do precisely what is called here, step by step by step? What will it mean to straighten out the path? Think of it this way.

It's like building a highway, a highway of holiness, a highway over which we can move toward God, a highway over which God can move toward us. I mentioned already, draw near to me and I will draw near to you. It's quite difficult to draw near to God if you've got no highway prepared.

Are there any low places in your life that need to be filled? Are you one of those moody persons who sinks low and lives in discouragement and distress? Fill up the low places, bring down the high places. Multitudes of professed Christians have no highway of holiness prepared because their own pride is mountain high. God's not going to climb a mountain to come to you.

He could, and he could remove the mountain, but he's told you to do it. And why do we dare ask God to do what he's already commanded us to do? Bring down the high places. Rid yourself of pride.

Pride is truly an abomination. What a stupid thing it is to be proud. What have you got to be proud of? And this passage is wonderfully helpful.

We'll come to it at the end, but I'll just give you a little foretaste. Toward the end of the portion we read, John the Baptist says, I baptize in water, but when he comes, whose sandals I'm not fit to untie. Now, was that you speaking? Granted, you're not fit to untie his sandals.

If John the Baptist, whom Christ said was the greatest, acknowledged that he was unfit, how do you dare think of yourself in the arrogant fashion that you have tended to think? You know, the great issue in terms of humility is not denial of truth. When John said, whose sandals I'm not fit to untie, was he exaggerating? Was he pretending? Was there make believe? Or did he tell the truth? Humility is not denying facts. Humility is keeping the facts in proper relationship to the greater facts.

The greatest preacher in the world today is nothing in comparison with Christ. The greatest missionary is not as much as dust in comparison with Christ. The way to humility is not to pretend, not to make believe, not to ask like the old comic strip figure of Casper Miltoast.

The way to humility is to constantly remind yourself, no matter who I am or what I am, I'm as nothing in comparison to Christ. Bring down the high places. Set your heart this morning to eliminate, by God's grace, pride.

So you fill up the low places. You bring down the high places. You straighten out the crooked places and the rough places in your life.

We live near the city of Chicago. Here it is, summer past, and there's still great potholes in the city streets where if you go over one of these potholes and don't know it's there, you'll break the axle of your vehicle, you'll blow out the tire. They don't know anything about making the rough places smooth.

They rob people of such a high percentage of their income in taxes, it ought to be the best city in the world instead of the worst. But I'm asking you, not do you live in Chicago, not do the potholes matter. I'm asking you, have you smoothed the road so Christ can travel to you? And you can travel to Christ? We're talking about a divine visitation.

We're talking about the sunrise from on high visiting us. Surely that's worth all the effort that you can possibly make. But look, if you will, at verse 7, he therefore began to say to the multitudes who were going out to be baptized by him, you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the raptical.

Now listen, friends, don't misinterpret that. Who came out to the wilderness to listen to John? The poor people, the uneducated people, the broken people, the people with obvious needs, yes, but also the religious leaders of the time, the scribes, the Pharisees. And John wisely turns to a portion of the crowd and says, you brood of vipers.

Now don't misunderstand. From some portions of the New Testament, we get the notion John baptized anybody that came to him. That's part of the great error of most southern churches, stupid enough to baptize everybody who asked for it.

I was told yesterday about an incident where a church had gathered for the baptism, and there were a number to be baptized, and there was a woman helping with the little things like the towels and so on, and she turned to a man who was standing there, and she said, and are you here to be baptized? Oh no, he said, he's my boyfriend. And immediately she realized, here's a homosexual ready to be baptized. Now I know a multitude of churches that would have gone ahead with the baptism, but thankfully in this particular case, this woman rushed right to the pastor and told him what she discovered, and he said, he will not be baptized here.

Let's get it straight. We are to prepare the way of the Lord, and when a person says they have repented, we've got to take the time to be sure that they have fruits in keeping with repentance. I abhor this crazy

notion that you baptize someone on the moment they confess faith in Christ.

You want to build the kingdom of hell? Go on with ridiculous practices like that. In a wicked day like this, we must be sure that those who say they have repented have repented, and how do we know? Well, understand that there are fruits that are appropriate to repentance, and if you think of yourself as repentant, ask sincerely, do I bear the fruits of repentance in my life? Do I hate sin? Do I love righteousness? Do I deny myself? Do I follow Christ at any cost? And then we have the mention of three different parties that came to John. After he has given this warning about bringing forth fruits in verse 9, he talks about the axe already laid at the root of the tree.

He makes it perfectly clear that every tree that does not bear fruit must be cut down and thrown into the fire. So, have you been bearing fruit? Are you always a fruit-bearing believer? If you are not, then you better face the fact. You have not prepared the way of the Lord.

True repentance results in a fruitful life. But then three groups come, and we read of these earlier. Our dear brother Anthony read the passage so well, so effectively.

There's a group out of the multitude, verse 10, who come saying, what shall we do? And the answer of John, let the man with two tunics share with him that has none. Let the one who has food do likewise. You wonder what it means to bear fruit in keeping with repentance? Well, that's one aspect of the fruit.

And then in verse 12, some tax gatherers also come to be baptized. And they say, teacher, what shall we do? And he tells them, collect no more than what you've been ordered to. Honesty, true integrity.

Is that part of your evidence of repentance? And then verse 14, some soldiers were questioning him, saying, and what about us? What shall we do? Now, the other answers aren't too objectionable, but this one is terrible. Look at what he tells the soldier. Do not take money from anyone by force and be content with your wages.

Is it any wonder that there are few unionists who are devoutly Christian? Well, we're not talking to the union. We're here together. And the question is simply, are you bearing fruit that is truly in keeping with repentance? But we must come to this last portion.

I'll try not to be excessively long, though I acknowledge that my definition of excessive may be different from yours. These words are of such great consequence and so vital to the passage. So we read again verse 16.

John answered, and he said to them all, as for me, I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming. I'm not fit to untie the thong of his sandals. He himself will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire.

Now, those last few words are, as I just said, vital to the whole passage. He shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. Now, listen to this remarkable fact.

The church in America pays more attention to the baptism of water than to the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire. Now, I hardly need to tell you again, I'm an old man. And I've been around a lot.

It's shocking the number of places and the variety of places where I get asked to speak, including extreme Pentecostals. And, of course, they believe that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is speaking in tongues. Now, I want to tell you plainly, I don't believe in nonsense.

And I'm not here representing stupidity. But I'm here to tell you that part of the proof of a repentant life is the baptism in the Holy Spirit and fire. And I want to ask you lovingly but bluntly, do you know what John was talking about? Do you know experientially what he was speaking of? Now, I want you to notice the wording.

It does not say, if you're special, if you're extraordinary, God may baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire. It is a positive statement. He shall baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire.

First of all, why this distinction between the Holy Spirit and fire? Well, it doesn't take an awful lot of study to discover what the baptism of the Holy Spirit results in. All you have to do is to read the book of Acts. And it is more than obvious that a baptism in the Holy Spirit is a baptism in power.

So I'm asking you as a caring friend, do you know the baptism of power? Do you limp along? I'm so glad to be a Christian. So excited about the kingdom of God. Would you move over so I can sit down? No, the baptism of power, the power of Christ in you, not something worked up, not something imagined, but reality.

So that the life you live is not the life of a broken down, half-hearted sinner, but the vibrant life of a true believer filled with the Holy Spirit. You see, the notion that has been spread is that this baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire is for special people, unique people. Well, if you want to believe that, shame on you.

Why not believe what the Bible says? He shall baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire. So the baptism of the Holy Spirit, a baptism of power. But what about the baptism of fire? Is that something fanatical, something ridiculous? Some of you know the name John Wesley.

A rather important figure in the evangelical revival of the 1700s. He said concerning an acquaintance of his, a man by the name of William Grimshaw, if England had three William Grimshaws, the whole of England would be ablaze for God because William Grimshaw is a man of fire and everywhere William Grimshaw goes, the fire of God falls. Fire, what does fire represent in Scripture? Well, we have the refiner's fire, the fire that burns out the impurities of the life.

The fire of God in the soul of man that rids one of the love of sin and gives one a burning passion for a life of holiness. So the baptism of the Holy Spirit, a baptism of power and the baptism of fire, a baptism of purity and a baptism of passion. I don't want to sound vulgar or disrespectful, but when I hear some men preach, I ask myself, are all of his children adopted? If he has no more passion in bed with his wife than he has in the pulpit, it's a true miracle that a child is conceived.

Now that's a bit coarse, but it's pretty plain. Are you a person of fire? Are you passionate? I spoke yesterday morning in North Carolina out of 1 Peter chapter 4 and in verse 2, it speaks about the passions of life that are feeding the lust of the flesh. My dear friends, what a glorious thing it is to meet someone whose passions are very much alive and all channeled to the glory of God.

I'm asking you plainly in this first meeting of this wonderful opportunity of drawing near to God, are you on fire for Christ? Is your life marked by holiness and great passion? And if not, what must you do? I'll tell you what you must do. You must believe. We are the weaklings.

We are the worthless persons that we are because we don't believe. Did Christ come to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire? John said he did. Who are you to deny it by a lifestyle that proves that it isn't true in your case? Let's get serious.

We're living at a desperate time in human history and there's nothing that human flesh can do to change it, but the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire can and will change it. Again, I say not the baptism of nonsense. Not clapping and stomping and prating about, but being filled with power and set on fire for Christ.

It is our, by faith. Let me liken it to another great biblical issue, sanctification. How does the true believer grow in the grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ? If you have tried to be good, you know how tiring it is.

I don't suppose this would be true of you, sister, but I've had days where for weeks and weeks I've pressed on in holiness and then I've said to myself, I'm tired. I'm just going to be myself today. Nasty, if necessary, to be myself.

Arrogant. Trying to be good is an exhausting task and it gets us nowhere. How are we made holy? By resolve, by action, or by faith? When Christ died and was buried and rose again and now lives on and on forever, did he only accomplish our justification or did he also accomplish our sanctification? Is not true holiness the result of believing in the finished work of Christ? Is it not joining the apostle Paul in reckoning yourselves to be dead in deed to sin and alive unto God? Is there not wisdom in every morning arising and saying, I am dead to sin, I am better yet alive to God, and I'm going to live like a man in whom the life of Christ is throbbing.

And every day that we claim the finished work of Christ, our sanctification is strong, glorious, God-honoring, world-benefiting, and every day of unbelief we limp along, we drag about, we look as if Christianity is a fraud, and the people who observe us say, who wants to be like that jerk? And the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire is laying hold of the finished work of Christ in faith and saying, I will not live without power, I will not live as if I were half-dead, I won't live an unholy life, Christ is my salvation, I will claim what Christ has done, I will live in the glory of the finished work of Christ. And everyone who by faith lays hold of what Christ has accomplished is ready for the sunrise from on high to visit, and I'm looking toward not just an overnight visit, I'm looking toward months and years of the glorious presence of Christ in the midst of his people, and I'm claiming it by faith. Will you join me?

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