



Luke 3:7–9

7 John said to the crowds coming out to be baptised by him, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father.” For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 9 The axe has been laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut

down and thrown into the fire.’

Reflection

Hellfire and brimstone preaching is not so common any more. And perhaps for good reason. Modern sensibilities and longer life expectancy seem to be more suited to a softly, softly approach. Tim Keller, the internationally acclaimed author and preacher from Redeemer Presbyterian in New York, has become famous for his approach to evangelism in which he intellectually challenges defeater beliefs (e.g. that Science disproves the existence of God or that Jesus wasn't an historical figure), holds up the beauty of the Gospel, and shows how the Gospel aligns with and enriches the baseline cultural narratives common to all in our post-Christian societies (e.g.

the sanctity and value of human life or our in-built desire for justice). In this way, Tim Keller (and those like him) lead people to Jesus in a culturally sensitive and often very convicting way.

And yet, there have been periods in Christian history when the most effective means of conversion seems to have been presenting the harsh truths of sin and eternal damnation as vividly as possible in front of the eyes of one's hearers. Different cultures and times sure, but the same timeless truths emphasized with an urgency that seems uncommon in our modern world. An example of this style of preaching is Jonathan Edward's famous (or infamous!) sermon 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God'. It is relentless, and makes for horrific reading, and yet during his life-

time whole towns would bend their knee to Jesus as the Great Awakening began to sweep America.

His text for the sermon was simply one quarter of a single verse, these ominous words from Deuteronomy 32:35,

In due time their foot will slip;

Here's an excerpt from the sermon to give you a feel for its weight. After listing ten deeply developed and relentless points Edward's summarises in this fashion,

... thus it is that natural men are held in the hand of God, over the pit of hell; they have deserved the fiery pit, and are already sentenced to it; and God is dreadfully provoked, his anger is as

great towards them as to those that are actually suffering the executions of the fierceness of his wrath in hell, and they have done nothing in the least to appease or abate that anger, neither is God in the least bound by any promise to hold them up one moment; the devil is waiting for them, hell is gaping for them, the flames gather and flash about them, and would fain lay hold on them, and swallow them up; the fire pent up in their own hearts is struggling to break out: and they have no interest in any Mediator, there are no means within reach that can be any security to them. In short, they have no refuge, nothing to take hold of, all that preserves them every moment is the mere arbitrary will, and uncovenanted, unobliged

forbearance of an incensed God.

And in preaching like this, Jonathan Edwards takes his cue I think from John the Baptist. Jonathan Edwards is credited with starting the Great Awakening in the mid-eighteenth century in America; John the Baptist, with a huge revival in the Ancient Near East in the year leading up to Jesus' public ministry.

Jonathan Edwards again,

O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God .. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing

about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and you have no interest in any Mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment.

And from today's passage, John the Baptist, reading from Luke 3:7–14

7 John said to the crowds coming out to be baptised by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father." For I

tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 9 The axe has been laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.’

It’s very likely here that we have John’s preaching in summary form, his typical sermon outline or bullet points recorded for us by Luke. The fuller version no doubt would have sounded a lot like Jonathan Edwards. Powerful images: broods of vipers, axes felling trees and being thrown into the fire, and rhetorical questions ‘Who warned you to flee the coming wrath of God? Certainly not I, since it is impossible to escape’ – we imagine John’s preaching as relentless and offensive and urgent as that of Jonathan Edwards’.

And his words would have been particularly offensive to his Jewish hearers who would have pre-dominated given the region. Jesus accused the Pharisees of following their father the Devil but John adds the imagery of writhing baby snakes, sons and offspring of Satan resting on their religious laurels claiming Abraham as their father as if that were somehow a free ticket to heaven. Far, far from it. Wrath and fire are coming, the axe is at the root of the tree and your true and saving faith will only be known by the fruit of a life lived in honour of God.

John's words are harsh, but his message is clear.

8 Produce fruit in keeping with re-

penitance ... every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. If there is no fruit, there has been no genuine repentance. Faith is not real if it does not result in life transformation and in John's day, in Jonathan Edwards' day and in our day, there are many, many people who make an outward show of religion, resting on their religious background or culture, who are destined for hell. Jonathan Edwards one last time,

The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God,

and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood. Thus all you that never passed under a great change of heart, by the mighty power of the Spirit of God upon your souls; all you that were never born again, and made new creatures, and raised from being dead in sin, to a state of new, and before altogether unexperienced light and life, are in the hands of an angry God. However you may have reformed your life in many things, and may have had religious affections, and may keep up a form of religion in your families and closets, and in the house of God, it is nothing but his mere pleasure that keeps you from being this moment

swallowed up in everlasting destruction.

Think & Pray

As gloomy as it is, meditate over the sure and certain prospect of hell this morning for all those who die outside of Jesus Christ. Even today, many come to faith when they are truly confronted with the alternative to faith in Jesus. And as the great revivals of the past clearly teach us, never be afraid to speak honestly, truthfully and passionately about sin and judgment – you will certainly cause offense; but in contrast, it is plain speaking truth that God so often uses to convict hearts.

Also think and pray over this question today, 'Are you producing fruit in keeping

with repentance?’ How fruitful are you as a Christian? How can you bear more fruit for our Lord? Perhaps you are a new Christian and recognise signs of transformation but are unsure about fruit. These signs are fruit! But it is also important that they develop and ripen into good deeds which will certainly flow out of the character changes that you are witnessing.

Pray for the lost and for fruit in your life today.