

***“He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” - “he will gather the wheat into his barn”***

**John the Baptist speaking of the work of Jesus**

In AD 27 John the Baptist came to his nation with a stern word of warning about a “wrath to come”, pronouncing that the “axe is already laid to the roots of the (national) tree”. He called for repentance. Three years or so later Jesus himself confirmed that the cataclysmic judgement of which John warned would certainly come on the nation. It simply had not heeded John’s call to repent and neither had it accepted him. At that point, therefore, AD 30, a heavy word of judgement hung over the nation and it was only a matter of time before it was fulfilled. The extraordinary fact is, however, that it was another 40 years before it came – a whole generation. And even more extraordinary was the fact that those intervening 40 years (and the 3 years preceding them) were to be paradoxically an era of amazing spiritual opportunity for the Jewish people, one in which large numbers of Jews found true faith in the God of their Fathers and in their Messiah. They represent unparalleled years of grace before an unparalleled plunge into centuries of national exile. Thus whenever national judgement is a real threat we should bear in mind the possibilities of the extended grace of God. It could be something of a lifeline for our own generation, though we can never afford the luxury of easy presumption. We have much to learn from those years of grace which God permitted his people. They are very well worth examining.

#### **Judgement and the Grace of God in John the Baptist**

When we look at John’s message as a whole it is obvious that he had a much greater message of blessing and hope than of judgement; he had a message about one who was coming who was infinitely superior to him and who would bring forgiveness of sin and a baptism in the Holy Spirit. It was a message that said, in fact, that the nation was about to be visited by the Messiah, it’s Saviour. This was good news of the highest order. This was a message of grace. God was speaking of judgement, certainly, but offering immense blessing. John was in fact heralding an unprecedented visitation from God: he was pointing to a window of immense opportunity, even if it was a context of judgement. He was saying that even if this Messiah would “burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire”, he would also “gather the wheat into his barn”. Thus a context of judgement was at the same time offering a window of great opportunity. Every time John proclaimed judgement he called for repentance and every time he called for repentance he proclaimed the coming of the King and his kingdom.

**John was heralding an unprecedented visitation from God**

There was an intense urgency about his announcement of the good news of the kingdom, an urgency that came in fact from his own thorough grasp of the dark clouds of judgement that overshadowed the nation. It was this urgency which reached the hearts of people. The urgency was expressed with the extraordinary boldness and authority of a man who had been filled with the Spirit since birth and trained in the desert. He really knew the state of the nation and he really knew what God was offering. Undoubtedly his work had a deep effect on many. There was a widespread response to his call for a baptism of repentance (Lk.3:7); many ordinary people acknowledged that he was a prophet of God and much genuine response undoubtedly took place. His fiery talk of judgement and his plain and pertinent preaching hit home. God was in a sense in a threatening mood with the message of his prophet, but he was at the same time seeking to bring blessing through the message. He was offering an extraordinary opportunity for them to get right with him, and many were doing so. These were days of grace as well as judgement. His work of pointing people to Jesus go unheeded. At least two of his own disciples followed Jesus after John pointed him out to them, and they subsequently became disciples of Jesus (Jn. 1:35ff).

#### **Judgement and the Grace of God in Jesus**

With the beginning of Jesus’ ministry we move from what was a very powerful prophetic and preparatory ministry under John into something of a totally different order, a demonstration of the presence and power of the Kingdom of God, an expression of the love and grace of God in full measure. There had never been such a time of grace ever before among the people of Israel as that which arrived with Jesus. As the disciples were later to declare, Jesus moved about “powerful in word and in deed before God and the people”. And all this was to a generation that had come to such a point in its lack of genuine spirituality that it was under threat of severe judgement. There could not have been a greater demonstration of the patient and loving desire of God to bring them to a better frame of heart. For some three years Jesus went everywhere with healing, deliverance, a call to follow him and an offer of eternal life. There was the same note of uncompromising urgency as with John, and an even greater note of authority and depth of teaching.

There was also widespread response; people were not only coming to him for healing but also believing on him. Soldiers, tax collectors, synagogue rulers, prostitutes, widows, whole households and even Pharisees were all responding despite the growing antagonism of the rulers. The Jerusalem crowd calling for his crucifixion could not obliterate the response in Galilee. Even if Jesus trusted himself to no man and could be seen sifting the crowds after the feeding of the 5,000, many like Martha, Mary, Lazarus and Nicodemus remained. It was all far from a full national response but there was a widespread harvest for the Son of Man.

Jesus’ ministry was a “Kingdom” ministry. He was a man “anointed of the Spirit”, moving in the power of the Spirit, anointed to preach and to heal. He brought great conviction with his teaching and drew large crowds. The common people heard him gladly. He exposed hypocrisy, he demanded response of the heart, he majored on clear moral response and was utterly fearless in his presentation of the truth, especially in the presence of both religious and political leaders. He faced up to the inevitable consequences of such a ministry.

All this amounts to an extraordinary outbreak of Holy Spirit activity through an extraordinary person and ministry. **What it underlines is the simple fact that though severe judgement is the backcloth with a whole generation under**

threat, God is at the same time prepared to work in the most amazing way to bring people to a better frame of mind and to the “things that belong to peace”. In more modern parlance we could say that judgement and Holy Spirit “revival” can be found operating together, the latter being a visitation of grace before the former has to arrive. For without question Jesus’ own ministry was the prototype of Holy Spirit outpouring to which all subsequent outpourings point back. In his generation it was almost as though the darker the clouds of judgement the stronger became the outflow of grace.

### Judgement and the Grace of God in the Early Church

Jesus said to his disciples, “*Greater things will you do than I have done*”, and the years from AD 30 to 70 bear witness to the truth of that promise. They were years which were to see the growth of a Christian church in Israel numbering many thousands of Jews, a church which was in the same period to spread to the gentile world of the Eastern Mediterranean and bring in many more thousands on non Jews. In fact the very land which Jesus put under judgement by his proclamations during the last week of his ministry was to become the cradle for the birth of the church and was to exert a profound and lasting influence on the rest of the world. These were years of grace indeed! It was almost as if the word of judgement had been reversed!

**“The very city whose walls were to be torn apart experienced the gift of the Holy Spirit”**

To be even more pointed it was in the very city whose walls were to be torn apart, Jerusalem, that the greatest blessing the world had ever experienced was first seen, namely the gift of the Holy Spirit “on all flesh”, and that within a few weeks of the Jesus’ word of judgement. Shortly after Jesus rose from the dead he had promised to his disciples a baptism in the Holy Spirit, an enduement of power that would make them witnesses to him first in Jerusalem and then progressively to the entire world. Fifty days later this was made good at Pentecost where, after the sheer supernatural happenings associated with the Holy Spirit as he fell on the disciples, the anointed preaching of Peter brought an immediate harvest of 3,000 Jews to faith in Jesus. Luke makes it plain to us that in the days that followed many thousands more accepted the Messiah and received the Spirit; so many indeed that they could not be counted. Even more significantly, perhaps, as time went on a great many priests became believers.

There was, however, no response among the ruling religious classes that had been responsible for the rejection and death of Jesus. On the contrary they embarked on a policy of persecution which, starting with a futile attempt to stop the disciples speaking of Jesus became increasingly violent, leading through the martyrdom of James and Stephen to widespread attacks on Christians generally which caused them to flee and saw many of them put to death. This, however, simply did not stop the outpouring of the grace of God; in fact the very chief of the persecutors, Paul, was converted to Christ by a direct sovereign intervention of God. He was given a revelation of Jesus whilst in the very process of making a journey to facilitate more persecution and execution of Christians. Not only was he converted but he became an apostle whose work was foundational in the work of spreading the gospel to the gentiles and in the formulation the gospel. The grace of God was a fact indelibly stamped upon Paul’s experience; he, a persecutor, was given a chance to make peace with his Saviour. His experience epitomizes what God was seeking to do even to a nation which had turned its back on him and was under a profound word of judgement.

By the mid 60s, however, the period of grace began to draw to a close. James the leader of the powerful Jerusalem church was put to death by the Jews. Jewish extremists gained power, rebelled against Rome and within a few years brought Jerusalem to its destruction. Judgement had arrived. The cradle of the church was destroyed, but by then the church’s centre of gravity had moved to the gentile world. It is astonishing, however, that the church began and came into prominence in a nation under judgement and took its most significant early leaders from among the very people under threat, the Jews.

**This means that even with a nation under judgement a serious seeking of an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and with it a large ingathering of believers, is not foolish or out of the question.** Whether God grants such a visitation is for God to decide, but the possibility undoubtedly is there. If there was any historic situation in which an answer to the great prayer of Habakkuk, “*In wrath remember mercy*” was amply demonstrated it was in those first decades of the early church.

**It is crucial that the time in which we now live is seen as period of grace, a window of opportunity**

**We may well be in a time in which a severe word of judgement lies over this nation, but it is crucial that the time in which we now live is seen as a period of grace, a window of opportunity. Ministries in the power of the Holy Spirit are vitally important for whatever time remains for us to gather many into the Kingdom and to make sure that re-planting takes place in many other parts of the world so that the gospel and its witness may continue in power. It is certainly not difficult to trace outpourings of grace and blessing in the life of our own nation when it has either been under judgement or when it was about to go through judgement. In response to the prospect of judgement we simply have to fix our eyes on this great propensity of God to remember his mercy even when judgement is inevitable**

It would be a mistake to think that this lesson concerning the grace of God even at the point of judgement was one which was absent from the Old Testament. This is simply not the case. One has only to consider the preaching of Jonah at Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of an extremely cruel and warlike nation, Assyria. In no way did it deserve such a visitation that accompanied Jonah’s preaching, but it was for that nation a time of great mercy. It did not last, but while it did, many undoubtedly found a netter way of life. More significantly, the combined and powerful ministry of Jeremiah the prophet and Josiah the king of Judah reveal God giving a huge window of opportunity for the Jews to return from their prolonged and flagrant indulgence in appalling paganism; one of Judah’s greatest kings and one of Judah’s greatest prophets appeared at one of Judah’s worst moments of rejecting God and his ways. Whilst it is true that it is only the New Testament that gives us moments of great outpourings of the Spirit on people, both Testaments abundantly concur in the picture of an amazingly gracious God.