

“What did you come to hear?”

John the Baptist, the great forerunner of Christ, is in prison. Later on, in Matthew (Mt. 14), we find out that he is in prison because he preached the Law to Herod the tetrarch. He preached against Herod’s violation of the sixth commandment, ‘you shall not commit adultery.’ In prison John hears about the works of the Christ.

Now you may recall that a dispute broke out between the disciples of John the Baptist and the disciples of Jesus. In response to this, John the Baptist said that he must decrease but Jesus must increase (Jn. 3:30).

John the Baptist’s ministry is certainly decreasing while he is in prison. Shortly after this, he will be beheaded, and his official ministry will come to an end.

John the Baptist was a strong preacher of the Law: consider, “But when [John the Baptist] saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Mt. 3:7–10)

John the Baptist is preaching repentance that leads to salvation. Paul describes it like this: “Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death (2 Cor. 7:10).”

You might ask: “What’s the difference between ‘godly’ sorrow and ‘worldly’ sorrow?” Another way to talk about it is in terms of our conscience where we feel this sorrow. Bryan Wolfmueller describes this difference well: He describes worldly sorrow as a troubled conscience and godly sorrow as a terrified conscience: “A troubled conscience has an awareness of sin. A terrified conscience has an awareness of God’s wrath over sin. Anyone, Christian or not, can have a troubled conscience. We know when we’ve made mistakes, hurt people, said and done the wrong things. A terrified conscience has its sin put in the context of God’s holiness, and it knows God is angry about sin (Wolfmueller, [Has American Christianity Failed?](#)).”

John the Baptist is all about God’s anger over sin. He’s all about the terror of judgment! And this is what perplexes him about Jesus.

As one commentator noted, “But as Jesus carried on his work, it seemed to be nothing but grace without one single act of judgment. This is what perplexed the Baptist “when he heard in the prison *the works* of the Christ.” Where were the works of judgment, the swinging of the fan, the

crashing blows of the ax? They were not being done. How, then, was this to be explained? Would another One follow, another who would perform these works of judgment?" (Lenski)

Jesus is healing people and preaching Good News. Where was the judgment?

But make no mistake. Judgment *was* and *is* coming.

Jesus turned the awesome, horrible, righteous judgment of God onto Himself. So, instead of His righteous judgment falling on you, that same judgment fell on Himself. He bore the suffering of the cross to the point of death to pay for your sins. This was no involuntary slaughter. Jesus says, "No one takes [My life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again (Jn. 10:18)."

This was to show God's righteousness:

"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith (Rm. 3:21–25a)."

Now a terrified conscience has somewhere to go.

Your baptism.

In your baptism, you received the forgiveness of all your sins by faith.

As Peter says, "Baptism... now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 3:21)."

In your baptism, you also receive the righteousness of Christ, which is perfect.

As Paul says, "For our sake [God the Father] made [God the Son] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21)."

Christ's payment for sin is applied to you directly and you receive God's own righteousness as your own.

As a gift.

Apart from the law.

Apart from your works of self-righteousness.

This amazing gift of grace is given to you by faith.

So, what is faith?

Faith is believing in Jesus. Faith is believing that the forgiveness of sins Christ won on the cross is actually yours. Faith is looking to the works of Jesus for your righteousness instead of your own meager works which are still tainted by original sin.

This faith was a gift of God in your baptism. This gift of faith is strengthened every time you hear the promises of forgiveness by God. It is strengthened every time you partake of the Lord's Supper believing the Word of forgiveness attached to our Lord's Body and Blood.

Today our Lord comes to us in the same way He came to the people in Jerusalem: with Grace.

He will come again in Glory with judgment.

We don't see Christ in the flesh like when He walked around preaching the Good News that John the Baptist hears about in prison. From the prison of our sins, we hear about Jesus through hearing His Word.

What did you come to hear today?

The Christmas Program?

What did you come to hear today?

Your child or grandchild, niece or nephew?

What did you come to hear today?

The forgiveness of your sins. Yes, even more, the forgiveness of sins that leads to your eternal salvation.

In Jesus Name. Amen.