

## “UNQUENCHABLE FIRE”

Nearly 2,000 years ago, huge crowds gathered to hear the preaching of John the Baptist. His was a message of repentance, accompanied with water baptism. Those who did not repent were likened to fruitless trees which would be cut down and thrown into fire. They would be like chaff, taken from the threshing floor, and burned.

Some of the Jews to whom John preached considered themselves righteous on the basis that Abraham was their forefather. But that family tree, John affirmed, was not the important thing. They needed to believe on the one for whom John was the forerunner: *Jesus*. John could baptize with water, but Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit—and with fire.

We notice that the word “fire” appears in each of the three consecutive verses of the following text, Matthew 3:10-12:

Verse 10: “And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the FIRE.

Verse 11: “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and FIRE.

Verse 12: “His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable FIRE.”<sup>1</sup>

We all understand, of course, that “trees” in passages like this represent people—some bear good “fruit” and some do not: “Every tree that does not bear good *fruit* is cut down and thrown

<sup>1</sup> We have used the New King James Version (NKJV) as a basic text for this article, but *any* translation will support all the various points made.



Painting by Francesco Hayez (1867) illustrating the burning of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans in A.D. 70.

into the fire” (Matt. 7:19). “By their *fruits* you shall know them” (verse 20). “A tree is known by its *fruit*” (Matt. 12:33, 34), etc.

The “winnowing fan”—a term that would have been familiar to those who heard John preach—was used to separate chaff from grains of wheat. The chaff, the worthless portion, could then be carried away by winds or burned up. The process is commonly referred to in Scripture, both as an actual practice, and as a figure of how ungodly people will meet their doom (Ruth 3:2; Job 21:18; Psalms 1:4; Isa. 5:24; 29:5,6; Jer. 23:28,29; Dan. 2:35; Hosea 13:3).

We intend to show, from Scripture and history, that the “wrath to come” about which John warned, was fulfilled in the fiery destruction of Jerusalem which occurred in A.D. 70.

To properly understand the passage before us (Matthew 3:10-12), two basic questions need to be asked: TO WHOM was John’s message directed? And, what was the TIME FRAME within which his words would be fulfilled?

First, it can be easily determined that John’s message—his *warning*—was directed TO ISRAEL.

Prior to his birth, an angel said concerning John: “He will turn many of the children of *Israel* to the Lord their God....So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to *Israel*” (Luke 1:16, 80).

“John...preached...the baptism of repentance to all the people of *Israel*” (Acts 13:24).

Both Isaiah and Malachi had prophesied about this messenger to *Israel* who would prepare the way of the Lord (Isa. 40:1-3; Matt. 3:3; 11:10; Mal. 3:1).

When John said of Christ, that he would thoroughly cleanse “His threshing floor,” the reference was to the Jewish nation, not some remote nation in another part of the world.

As Adam Clarke (1762—1832) has written: “Does this not mean the *land of Judea*, which had been long, as it were, the *threshing-floor* of the Lord?”

The *location* of John's ministry was Judea (Matt. 3:1). He baptized in the Jordan River (verse 6). The people who gathered were from Jerusalem, Judea, and that region, including many Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt. 3:5,7).

Some to whom John preached supposed they were righteous because of their fleshly descent from Abraham (Matt. 3:9). Obviously his message was to *Jews*—not people in China, Russia, or Brazil—none of them claimed descent from Abraham! So, clearly, John's message was directed to Israel, to the Jewish people.<sup>2</sup>

As to the TIME FRAME of John's message, this is also easy to determine:

When John saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath [*about*] to come?" (Matt. 3:7; Lk. 3:7). The Greek word that is here translated "to come" is *mellô*, a word commonly used in Scripture to indicate something that is *about to happen*. The wrath to come that John preached about, was *not* something far off in the dim, distant future.

Speaking of Christ, John went on to say, "His winnowing fan *is* in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor" (verse 12); or, as another translation words it, "He is *ready* to separate the chaff from the grain" (NLT). The "chaff," the unrepentant portion of the Jewish nation, would be burned up with fire.

John told them to bear "fruits worthy of repentance," because "even *now* the ax *is* laid to the root of the trees....every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (verses 8-10).

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<sup>2</sup> In the New Testament, the terms "Israelites" and "Jews" are used interchangeably: Those who were termed "men of Israel" (Acts 2:22,36; 3:12; 4:8,10; 5:35) were also referred to as "the nation of the Jews," and their land as "the land of the Jews" (Acts 10:22,28,39). In one verse Paul calls himself a Jew, in another place an Israelite (Acts 22:3; Rom. 11:1), etc.

Esteemed biblical scholar, John Lightfoot (1602-1675), wrote: "By the ax being *now* laid to the root of the tree, may fitly be understood, first, the certainty of their desolation; and second, the *nearness*, in that the instrument of their destruction was already prepared, and brought close to them; the Romans that should ruin their city and nation, being already masters and rulers over them."

Among those who heard John preach were the *Sadducees*. "Who has warned you," John asked, "to flee from *the wrath to come*?" (Matt. 3:7). Because the Sadducees did not believe in a resurrection or life after death (Matt. 22:23-30; Acts 23:6-8), they would have understood that the coming wrath pertained to this life. It would be a *national* disaster.

That national disaster was later described by Jesus as "great distress *in the land*, and wrath upon *this people*" (Lk. 21:23). Jerusalem itself, the capital city, would be destroyed and also the temple, one stone not being left upon another (Luke 21:5,6, 20; Matt. 24:1,2). The TIME when these things would happen was clearly defined by Jesus: it would all happen *within that generation* (Matt. 23:36; 24:34).

On another occasion, Jesus mentioned how the Jews, upon seeing a cloud in the west knew a shower was coming; or a south wind indicated the approach of hot weather. "Hypocrites!" he said, "You can discern the face of the sky and of the earth, but how is it you do not discern THIS TIME?" (Luke 12:55, 56). The subject was *not* about something to happen centuries later! Continuing on, we read:

"There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, 'Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things?...Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you REPENT you will all *likewise perish*'" (Luke 13:1-5).

For that "whole nation to *perish*" because "the Romans could come and take away both our place and nation," was a reason for consternation among the Jews (see John 11:48-50). But, sadly, the Jewish nation did not repent, and did perish—in A.D. 70.

For those Jews who did repent, however, it was a different story. "It is worthy of remark, that no *genuine Christian* perished in the destruction of Jerusalem," wrote Adam Clarke, citing historical references from Eusebius and Epiphanius; "they all, previously to the siege by Titus, escaped to Pella....And it is as remarkable that not one *Jew* escaped!—all either fell by the sword, perished by famine, or were led into captivity!" (*Clarke's Commentary*, Notes on Hebrews, Chapters 6 and 10).

In those intervening years, beginning with John's warning of wrath to come, the Jews became divided into two categories: Those who "received" Christ and those who "received him *not*" (John 1:11,12). "There was a DIVISION among them because of him" (John 7:43; 9:16; 10:19; Luke 12:51). Those who received Christ were baptized with the Holy Spirit; those who did not receive Christ—those who were called a "brood of vipers" and whose "father was the devil" (Matt. 3:7; 12:34; John 8:44)—were baptized with the fire of Divine judgment.

W. E. Vine, in his scholarly *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (article: "Baptism") explains: Though the word translated "baptism" is most often used of *water* baptism, it "is used metaphorically also in two distinct senses:

"Firstly, of baptism by the Holy Spirit, which took place on the day of Pentecost;

"Secondly, of the calamity which would come upon the nation of the Jews, *a baptism of the fire of Divine judgment* for rejection of the will and word of God, Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16."

Some have taken the words "and with fire" to mean spiritual fervor, enthusiasm. They may testify, "I was baptized with the Holy Ghost *and fire!*"

Occasionally a church may use a name like “Fire-Baptized Church of God,” etc. This is all well-intended—the Holy Spirit *does* provide power and spiritual energy, which is not to be quenched (1 Thess. 5:19). But apparently that was not what John meant in *this* context. Notice how the word “fire” appears in the three consecutive verses of Matthew 3:

Verse 10: “...every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the FIRE.

Verse 11: “...baptize with the Holy Spirit, and with FIRE.

Verse 12: “... He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable FIRE.”

It is highly unlikely that “fire” in verse 11 would have an *entirely different meaning* than in the verse right before it and the verse right after it. The “fire” in verse 10 is a fire of destruction, the “fire” in verse 12 is a fire of destruction, so—in context—the “fire” in verse 11 is also that of destruction.

Several passages speak of believers being baptized with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8; John 1:33; Acts 1:5; Acts 11:15,16), but the phrase “and with fire” appears *only* in the warning of John the Baptist about the fiery destruction that was to come on an unrepentant nation (Matt. 3:10-12; Luke 3:16,17).

Similar to the message of John, the book of Hebrews compared the two groups of Jews. Those who received Christ were like plants that would bring forth good fruit and be blessed. The others would bear thorns and briars. These, being “rejected,” were “*near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned*” (Heb. 6:7,8).

Commenting on this passage, Adam Clarke wrote: “It is acknowledged...that this epistle was written *before* the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans ...and here I suppose the apostle refers to that *approaching destruction*...their city and temple were shortly to be *burnt up* by the Roman armies...the wrath of God would come upon them to the uttermost.”

Clarke goes on to say concerning Hebrews 13:14—“For here we have *no*

*continuing city*, but we seek one to come”—that this “is an elegant and forcible allusion to the approaching destruction of Jerusalem. The Jerusalem that was *below* was about to be burnt with *fire*, and erased to the ground; the Jerusalem that was from above was that alone which could be considered to be permanent.”

In Jesus’ Parable of the Marriage Feast, the king planned a marriage celebration for his Son, and sent out messengers to invite guests. But they rejected the invitation, the messengers were mistreated and some were killed. “When the king heard about it, he was furious. And he sent out his armies, destroyed those murderers, *and burned up their city*” (Matt. 22:1-7).

We are clearly told that the chief priests and Pharisees knew that Jesus spoke parables like this against *them* (Matt. 21:45). The city facing destruction by fire was Jerusalem.

Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed two times. In the Old Testament, it happened at the hand of the Babylonians. When it happened again, in A.D. 70, it was at the hand of the Romans. In both cases, it was the judgment of God being carried out against an unrepentant nation. There are striking parallels between the two:

Remember how John the Baptist likened unrepentant Jews to “chaff” that would be “winnowed” and “burned”? This was the *same* wording used by Jeremiah prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in the Old Testament:

“[The people of] Jerusalem...have forsaken me...I will *winnow* them with a *winnowing fan* at the city gates...I will *destroy* my people since they do not return from their ways...for a FIRE is kindled in my anger” (Jer. 15:5-14).

Remember how John the Baptist spoke of unrepentant Jews as “trees” that did not bear “fruit”—and how they would be “thrown into the fire”? This was the *same* wording used by Jeremiah prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in the Old Testament:

“Thus says the LORD to the house of the king of Judah...I will make you a wilder-

ness, cities which are not inhabited. I will prepare destroyers against you...they shall cut down your choice cedars and *cast them into the fire*. ... [The people of] this great city...have forsaken the covenant of the LORD” (Jer. 22:6-9). “I will punish you according to the *fruit* of your doings, says the LORD: and I will kindle a *fire* in the forest thereof, and it shall devour all things round about it” (Jer. 21:14).

Over and over we notice that verses like these use the word “fire,” which prompts the question: Was it *actual* fire or *figurative*? Often it was both.

Sometimes “fire” was used as a *figure* for persecution, difficult times, or oppressive situations. Egypt, because of conditions the Israelites suffered there, was referred to as an “iron furnace” (Deut. 4:20; 1 Kings 8:51; Jer. 11:4). The persecution early Christians endured was called a “fiery trial” (1 Peter 1:7). The “fire” of God’s wrath that came upon Jerusalem in the Old Testament consisted of death, sword, famine, and captivity. All these afflictions are listed, followed by the words: “*For a fire is kindled in My anger, which shall burn upon you*” (Jer. 15:1-14).

But before it was all over, ACTUAL fire *also* played a part:

“I will give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall *burn* it with FIRE...the king of Babylon’s army...will fight against it and take it and *burn* it with FIRE; and I will make the cities of Judah a desolation” (Jer. 34:2, 21,22).

“Zedekiah...reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. He did evil in the sight of the LORD...the people transgressed more and more...the wrath of the LORD arose against his people, till there was *no remedy*...they *burned* the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, *burned* all its palaces with FIRE” (2 Chron. 36:11-19).

But was this fire that destroyed Jerusalem described as “*fire that would not be quenched*”? Certainly—*over and over!*

“Thus says the LORD: Behold, I will bring calamity on THIS PLACE and on its inhabitants...because they have forsaken me...Therefore My wrath shall be aroused against THIS PLACE *and shall not be QUENCHED*” (2 Kings 22:16,17).

“Thus says the LORD: ‘Behold, I will bring calamity...they have forsaken me ...Therefore My wrath will be poured out on THIS PLACE, and not be *QUENCHED*’ (2 Chron. 34:24,25).

“Thus says the LORD God: ‘Behold, My anger and My fury will be poured out on THIS PLACE—on man and on beast, on the trees of the field and on the fruit of the ground. And it will burn and not be *QUENCHED*’” (Jer. 7:20).

“You men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, [repent]...lest My fury come forth like *fire*, and burn so that *no one can QUENCH* it” (Jer. 4:4).

“I will cause you to serve your enemies in the land which you do not know; for you have kindled a FIRE in my anger which shall burn forever...in all the gates of Jerusalem ...will I kindle a FIRE...and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be *QUENCHED*” (Jer. 17:4, 19, 27).

“Thus says the LORD...I will fight against you...in anger and fury and great wrath. I will strike the inhabitants of this city...I have set my face against *this city*...It shall be given into the hand of the king of Babylon...he shall burn it with FIRE...My fury shall go out like FIRE, and burn so that *no one can QUENCH* it, because of the evil of your doings” (Jer. 21:4—12).

“Behold, I will kindle a FIRE in you, and it shall devour every green tree and every dry tree in you: the blazing *flame* shall not be *QUENCHED*...and all flesh shall see that I, the LORD, have kindled it; it shall not be *QUENCHED*” (Ezek. 20:47, 48).

The Hebrew word used in these Old Testament passages about “fire not quenched” is *kabah*. A comparison of scripture with scripture, shows that the term John the Baptist used, “unquenchable fire,” is *asbestos*, a Greek *equivalent*. Translators have used the terms “unquenchable fire” and “fire not quenched” *interchangeably*.

We should keep in mind that the Old Testament was “*The Bible*” of John’s day. There is no reason to suppose he used this term in some *different* sense than what was written in the Bible!

At the close of the Old Testament, Malachi prophesied to the nation of *Israel* (Mal. 1:1; 3:9). “Behold, I will send *you* Elijah” (Mal. 4:5). Centuries later, John the Baptist was the fulfillment

of this prophecy. Prior to his birth, an angel announced: “And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him *in the spirit and power of Elijah*, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children” (Luke 1:16,17). Jesus said, “This is Elijah, which was for to come” (Matt. 11:14; 17:10-13).

But the prophecy of Malachi also included a warning—in the very last verse of the Old Testament. If the nation of Israel did not repent, God said, “I will come and strike the earth with a curse.” In this case, the NIV and similar translations are more precise: “I will come and strike the *land* with *total destruction*.” The curse was not coming on “the earth” (the planet earth), but *et ha-arets, this very land*, and the word translated “curse,” *cherem*, means, literally, *extermination*.

In A.D. 66 the fires of tribulation and disaster began to sweep across that land. People were tortured, robbed, killed, or taken as slaves into captivity. Their towns and villages were burned with fire by the Roman forces, ultimately leading up to the fiery destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70. It is all spelled out in the writings of Jewish historian Josephus (A.D. 37-100) who was an eye-witness to the events. Here are some excerpts:

“And now the soldiers had already put FIRE to the gates...it spread itself all on the sudden, and caught hold on the cloisters. Upon the Jews seeing this FIRE all about them, their spirits sunk together with their bodies, and they were under such astonishment, that not one of them made any haste, either to defend himself or to *QUENCH* the FIRE, but they stood as mute spectators of it only...This FIRE prevailed during that day and the next also...” (Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, Book 6, 4:2).

“But as for that house, God had, for certain, long ago doomed it to the FIRE; and now that fatal day was come, according to the revolution of the ages; it was the tenth day of the month...upon which it was formerly *burnt* by the king of Babylon...one of the soldiers...being hurried on by a certain *divine fury*...set FIRE to a golden window ...As the *flames* went upward, the Jews made a great clamor” (Book 6, 4:5).

“And now a certain person came running to Titus, and told him of this FIRE ...he rose up in great haste, and...ran to the holy house, in order to have a *stop* put to the FIRE...[he ordered] them to *QUENCH* the FIRE. But they did not hear what he said ...they encouraged those that were before them to set it on FIRE” (Book 6, 4:6).

“And now, since Caesar [Titus] was no way able to restrain the enthusiastic fury of the soldiers...the FIRE proceeded on more and more...But as the *flame* had not as yet reached to its inward parts, but was still consuming the rooms that were about the holy house, and Titus supposing...that the house itself might yet be saved, he came in haste and endeavored to persuade the soldiers to *QUENCH* the FIRE...[But] the *flame* burst out from within the holy house itself immediately...and thus was the holy house *burnt* down” (Book 6, 4:7).

“While the holy house was on FIRE, everything was plundered that came to hand, and ten thousand of those that were caught were slain...The *flame* was also carried a long way, and made an echo, together with the groans of those that were slain; and because this hill was high, and the works at the temple were very great, one would have thought...that the hill itself, on which the temple stood, was seething *hot*, as full of FIRE on every part of it...As for the priests ...the FIRE burst out upon them...And now the Romans, judging that it was in vain to spare what was round about the holy house, *burnt* all those places...They also *burnt* down the treasury chambers” (Book 6, 5:1,2).

Repeatedly Josephus mentions efforts to “quench” the fire—even by Titus, especially when he sought to save the temple as a monument to Roman conquest—but all efforts were in vain. The judgment of God was carried out. No one was able to *QUENCH that FIRE—it was unquenchable!*

This article, presented “as a study,” is intended to illustrate that the *setting* and *time frame* of any given biblical passage should not be ignored—and that the Bible should be its own interpreter, as we compare scripture with scripture.

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