

## *The Importance of Repentance*

*Repent, for the kingdom from heaven is at hand!*

—John the Baptist

Jewish believers living during the Herodian dynasty were expecting the Messiah to come at any moment and bring a new age full of exciting changes. Their expectations were largely based on Daniel's prophecy of the seventy weeks and its calendric calculations concerning the Messiah's coming. The prophecies of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Malachi, well known to the Jews, had especially generated great anticipation for the Messiah's imminent appearance and for His restoration of the Kingdom of God to Israel.

In Malachi, God promises to send a forerunner to prepare the nation for the coming Messiah:

Behold, I send My messenger,  
And he will prepare the way before Me  
And the Lord, whom you seek,  
Will suddenly come to His temple,  
Even the Messenger of the covenant (Mal 3:1; cf. Mk 1:2).

The forerunner will be “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD; make His paths straight’” (Mt 3:3; cf. Isa 40:3; Mk 1:3; Lk 3:4; Jn 1:23). To fulfill this promise, God sends John the Baptist as the forerunner

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of Jesus Christ, to prepare the people for His new way, which will formally be called “The New Covenant.” Accordingly, John begins his ministry of preparation by preaching: “Repent, for the kingdom from heaven is at hand” (Mt 3:2), informing the people that the messianic kingdom is “within their grasp.” When Jesus Christ, “the Messenger of the Covenant,” begins His ministry, He likewise preaches, “Repent, for the kingdom from heaven is at hand” (Mt 4:17; cf. Mk 1:14-15; Lk 4:43).

As John preaches “repentance” to the multitudes, preparing the way for the Messiah and His kingdom, he observes that some Pharisees and Sadducees (leaders of the Jewish nation) have come to listen. John takes this opportunity to teach three parables to warn them, giving instructions concerning repentance and what they must do to prepare for the messianic “Kingdom [coming] from Heaven”<sup>1</sup> (Mt 3:7-12). The first of these parables describes the leaders of the Jews as a “generation of vipers” (Mt 3:7), the second describes their nation as “a tree not producing good fruit” (Mt 3:10), and the third describes a divine judgment as “burning up the chaff” (Mt 3:12).

### “Generation of Vipers”

John the Baptist’s ministry heralds the commencement of preparations for the Kingdom from Heaven. The three parables of John emphasize the importance of repentance, meaning changing one’s thinking, in order to participate in the Kingdom from Heaven and escape the consequences of disobedience. The context is John’s preaching, preparing the way for the Messiah, proclaiming the “readiness at hand” of the Kingdom from

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<sup>1</sup> “Heaven” (*ouranōn*) is an ablative genitive. Here, the ablative points to the source or origin of something, its detachment or departure from it. Thus, this phrase is best translated “Kingdom from Heaven.” The phrase “Kingdom from Heaven” is a phrase with special meaning for a Jewish audience (in the Gospel of Matthew), whereas the phrase “Kingdom of God” is generally used when there is a mixed (Jew and Gentile) audience, such as in the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and John. The phrase “Kingdom from Heaven” specifically refers to the promise of God given in Daniel, that the Son of Man will come in/with the clouds from heaven to establish His Kingdom, ruling over the whole earth and sharing His authority with the saints (Dan 7:13-14, 22, 27).

Heaven. His theme is one of warning: believers need to repent if they want to enter God's kingdom; furthermore, simply being a descendant of Abraham, by itself, will no longer afford a Jew the opportunity to enter into the Kingdom of God.

Both the common people and the leaders of the Jews need to repent. The Jewish leaders include the Pharisees who try to please God by obeying the Law of Moses as much as possible, the scribes who are experts in the Old Testament Scriptures, the Sadducees who do not believe any of the supernatural things described in the Scriptures, and others, such as Levite priests and leaders in the Sanhedrin.

In John's first parable concerning the importance of repentance, he compares the Jewish leaders (descendants of Abraham) to "a generation of vipers," telling them that they must change their way of thinking. The Greek word *gennēma* (from the root word, *gennaō*), translated "brood" or "generation," conveys the idea of "offspring," that is, "one generated by a father" (Mt 3:7; Lk 3:7; cf. Mt 12:34; 23:33) or "fruit from a vine" (Mt 26:29; Mk 14:25; Lk 22:18; 2Co 9:10). The phrase "generation of vipers" is undoubtedly intended to remind John's audience of the first proclamation of the gospel mentioning the "seed of the serpent" (Gen 3:15).

In the Garden of Eden, when God pronounces judgment on the serpent, and then on Eve and Adam, He prophesies concerning the gospel, that "the seed of the serpent" will bruise the Messiah's heel and that the Messiah's heel will crush the head of "the seed of the serpent." In the metaphor, "the seed of the serpent," the "serpent" represents Satan (Rev 12:9), and the "seed" represents the offspring of Satan, specifically, those who do his will. This phrase does not describe any actual offspring of Satan (being an angel, it is unlikely that he has offspring), but the phrase, "the seed of the serpent," describes the people and governments of this fallen world which do his bidding or act in accordance with his evil character.

Throughout the Bible, various governments are described as beasts, with attributes matching the animal's character. (In one of Daniel's prophecies, Babylon is a lion, Medo-Persia is a bear,

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Greece is a leopard, and Rome is a dreadful beast.) A government which does Satan's will, acting as an adversary of God or afflicting His people (or His Messiah), should be perceived to be a "seed of the serpent" (e.g., Pharaoh opposing God's will at the time of the Exodus).

By describing the Jewish leaders as a "generation of vipers," John the Baptist indicates that they are "seed of the serpent" because they are acting as adversaries against God's will.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the Jewish leadership will eventually fulfill the gospel prophecy of "the seed of the serpent" (Gen 3:15) by manipulating the trial and events which will condemn Jesus Christ to die on a cross. As the leaders of Israel, they will lead the nation into divine judgment for this terrible, unjust deed. Here, at least three years before these leaders crucify Jesus Christ, John is asking them, "Who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Mt 3:7). Is there a way that some of these individuals can escape God's wrath? Yes, they can "repent" and "bear fruits worthy of repentance" (Mt 3:8).

The Greek word *metanoēō*, translated "to repent," means to change one's mind; literally, it is "to think differently afterwards" (*meta* -with, after; *noeō* -to think, to understand). Many incorrectly assume the biblical definition of "repent" is always related to one's sin. Indeed, when used in the context of sin, "to repent" can mean to change one's mind concerning one's sin (e.g., 2Co 12:21), and many of those baptized by John the Baptist evidently did take this opportunity to confess their

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<sup>2</sup> Later, Jesus addresses the leaders of the Jews who, in spite of the fact that they are descendants of Abraham and are counting on God's promises, are doing the will of Satan: "I know that you are Abraham's descendants, but you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. I speak what I have seen with My Father, and you do what you have seen with your father [Satan]" (Jn 8:37-38). Jesus informs them that they are not like Abraham, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham. But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this. You do the deeds of your father [Satan]" (Jn 8:39-41). Jesus emphasizes that they are not doing the will of God the Father: "You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do" (Jn 8:44).

sins (Mt 3:6). Generally, however, “to repent” simply means “to change one’s mind.”

Many of the Jews in John’s audience have already believed God’s gospel (e.g., Gen 3:15; 12:3; 2Sa 7:12-16) and have already been reconciled to God. Everyone who walks in the steps of faith of Abraham, believing God’s gospel promise, is credited with righteousness (justified by faith, Gen 15:6) and forgiven of his sins (Rom 4:1-12). Now these believers must prepare themselves for the coming Messiah, so John exhorts them “to repent,” to change their thinking in order to prepare them to accept the Messiah and His new way.

John the Baptist mentions a specific way in which his audience must change: “do not think, saying to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones” (Mt 3:9). The leaders of the Jews are expecting to be among the first to enter the Kingdom from Heaven because they are descendants of Abraham and have obeyed the Old Covenant Law better than most Jews. John is informing these leaders that their thinking is wrong. He warns them that, even though they are descendants of Abraham and believe God’s gospel promises concerning the seed of Abraham, they are not necessary for the fulfillment of God’s prophetic promises to Abraham. Surprisingly, John notifies them that God can fulfill His prophecy by “rais[ing] up children [seed] to Abraham from these stones” (Mt 3:9).

How does this proclamation of John the Baptist prepare the way for the Messiah? Why is he warning the Jews that they are no longer necessary for God to fulfill His promises to Abraham? What does it mean that God can raise up descendants to Abraham from stones? John is preparing the Jews to think in a radically new way because many customs and traditions of God’s covenant people are about to change.

### *Excursus on “Spiritual Descendants” of Abraham*

With the coming of the Messiah, His “new” way will provide a New Covenant (including a New Law) for a “new” covenant people of God. Incorporating a “new” covenant people of God is

a radical change which will allow countless additional people to receive the blessings of God's New Covenant. Formerly, only the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were promised the Covenant's blessings; consequently, the blessings of the Old Covenant were enjoyed only by the people of the commonwealth of Israel (Eph 2:12). John's proclamation indicates a major change coming with the New Covenant: physical descendants of Abraham will not automatically be included in the covenant people of God; instead, only spiritual descendants of Abraham will comprise the covenant people of God and obtain the blessings of the New Covenant.

Among other novel concepts in Romans, Paul explains this new idea of Abraham's spiritual descendants. He begins by distinguishing physical, "outward Jews" from spiritual, "inward Jews." "Indeed . . . [outward Jews] rest on the [Old] Law, and make [their] boast in God, and know His will . . . [but they] dishonor God through breaking the [Old] Law" (Rom 2:17-23). Paul clarifies that being an outward Jew is not sufficient, by itself, to please God. On the other hand, being a spiritual descendant of Abraham depends on one's heart: "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise<sup>[3]</sup> is not from men but from God" (Rom 2:28-29).

In Romans 9, this idea of being a "spiritual Jew" is further developed: "For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children [of Abraham] just because they are the seed of Abraham, but 'In Isaac your seed shall be called'" (Rom 9:6-7). Remember, Abraham had other sons besides Isaac. Paul indicates that mere physical descent from Abraham does not automatically include someone in the covenant blessings God promised to Abraham and his descendants. He repeats this and further explains: "That is, those who are children [of Abraham by means] of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the

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<sup>3</sup> Paul is making a pun about the "spiritual Jew" when he says "whose Jewishness [Judah means 'praise'] is not from his human descent but from God."

children of the promise are counted as [Abraham's] seed" (Rom 9:8). Categorically, Abraham's other sons are also his descendants; however, the covenant is limited to Isaac, the promised son. (A similar promise includes Jacob and excludes Esau; cf. Gen 25:23; Rom 9:10-13). Under the New Covenant, only "spiritual Jews" constitute the covenant people of God.<sup>4</sup>

In review, God prompted John the Baptist to warn the Jews that they must change their way of thinking: they must not continue thinking that being physical descendants of Abraham will be enough to ensure their inclusion in blessings of the Kingdom from Heaven. Likewise, Paul teaches that physical descent from Abraham is not what God requires under the New Covenant; instead, circumcision of the heart is required—a believer must become a "spiritual Jew" to obtain the blessings promised to Abraham. Very likely, when John the Baptist says that God can raise up descendants to Abraham from stones, he is referring to circumcision of the heart. Stones are clearly not physical descendants of Abraham; neither are (most) Gentiles; however, a believer who circumcises his heart "in the Spirit" is a spiritual Jew (Rom 2:29; cf. Deu 10:12-16). To better understand the meaning of "hearts of stone" and "circumcised hearts," a quick study of some of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the New Covenant will be helpful.

### *Excursus on "Hearts of Stone and Flesh"*

An important feature of the New Covenant which God had promised the Jews is that His New Law can change the believer's heart; in fact, His Law can be written on their hearts:

"But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days," says the LORD: "I will put my law in their mind, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be My people. No more shall every man [need to] teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them" (Jer 31:33-34).

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<sup>4</sup> This change concerning God's new covenant people does not negate His continuing promise to bless Abraham's descendants (Gen 12:3).

As God's New Law is written on a believer's heart, he will come to know God better; specifically, he will become more intimate with God and His will, knowing what pleases Him, and as he obeys God's Law, it will transform (circumcise) his heart.

Such ideas as "hearts of stone and flesh," "new heart," "new spirit," and even the word "repent," become signals to the audience that the topic of discussion (or its context) might concern the New Covenant. Ezekiel clearly links the terms "repent," "new heart," and "new spirit" when he calls the Jews to "Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that your iniquity will not be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit" (Eze 18:30-31).

Later, in the context of the regathering of Israel after being scattered among the nations, Ezekiel uses the phrases "heart of stone" and "heart of flesh" to describe a change the New Covenant will bring:

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God (Eze 36:25-28).

Paul recalls these ideas from Ezekiel, explaining how the Corinthians are fulfilling his prophecies as their hearts are being transformed by the ministry of the New Covenant:

You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart (2Co 3:2-3).

Paul applies Ezekiel's prophecies, comparing their old "hearts of stone" with their new "hearts of flesh." By comparing the "tablets of stone" upon which the Old Law was written with the "tablets of flesh" upon which the New Law is now being written, Paul is portraying the dramatic change from the old way of the



Old Covenant to the new way of the New Covenant, which transforms a believer to be like Christ (2Co 3:18; cf. Heb 7:18-19).

As far as the idea that God can raise up “stones” who become descendants of Abraham, in Romans 9 and 10 Paul offers a solution demonstrating a divine means of this transformation. Before examining Paul’s solution, one must remember that, historically, the Jews are God’s covenant people and the Gentiles are not. Remarkably, Paul is about to explain God’s plan to create a new covenant people of God by replacing disobedient Jews with Gentile believers.

Paul begins his explanation of how the Gentiles will be included in the covenant people of God with a quotation from Hosea:

I will call them “My people” who were not My people, And her “beloved,” who was not beloved. And it shall come to pass in the place where it was said to [the Israelites], “You are not My people,” There [the replacements] shall be called “sons of the living God” (Rom 9:25-26: cf. Hos 1:9-10).

When God says to the rebellious Israelites, “You are not My people,” this statement refers to the historical event in 722 BC when He judged the northern nation, sending them into captivity, and the Israelite people become “lost,” being scattered throughout the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians then repopulated Israel’s vacant land with Gentiles. Hosea refers to the vacant land when he says that “in the place” where God said to the disobedient northern Israelites, “You are not My people,” God will call the new inhabitants “My people,” even “sons of the living God.” Furthermore, Paul explains that the change in God’s covenant people, from “physical descendants” of Abraham (Jews) to include Gentile replacements as “spiritual descendants” of Abraham, will be so extensive that only a remnant of the vast number of God’s chosen people (Jews) will be saved (Rom 9:27-29).

Paul then clarifies how the Gentiles will obtain that which, generally, the Jews did not obtain:

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The Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness [of the Old Law], have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the Law. So, they stumbled at the stumbling stone (Rom 9:30-32).

The mere outward compliance of a believer with God's will (covenant law) is not what is pleasing to God. What God desires is righteousness by "the law of faith"—belief and obedience like Abraham's, which results in the transformation of a believer's heart. The Gentiles whom Paul mentions here become examples of this transformation, described earlier as the "circumcision of the heart," and thus are "inward/spiritual Jews." This is a radical new way of thinking, and every believer, not just the Jewish people and their leaders, must change his thinking (repent) to match God's new way.

### "A Tree Not Producing Good Fruit"

John the Baptist's second parable concerning the importance of repentance describes another way the Jews must change their thinking: instead of concentrating so much of their effort on compliance with the Old Law, they need to focus on bearing fruit. John warns them, "And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Mt 3:10). This metaphor can be applied to nations or to individuals who are not producing good fruit (i.e., Mt 7:15-20); in this instance, John is addressing the leaders of the Jewish nation.

In Jeremiah, as God proclaims judgment on the house of Israel and the house of Judah, a metaphor of a tree producing fruit is applied to the nation:

The LORD called your name, "Green Olive Tree, Lovely and of Good Fruit." [But] with the noise of great tumult He has kindled a fire on it, and its branches are broken. For the LORD of hosts, who planted you, has pronounced doom against you for the evil of the house of Israel and of the house of Judah, which they have done against themselves to provoke Me to anger in offering incense to Baal (Jer 11:16-17).

God recounts how He brought the Israelites out of Egypt and gave them His Covenant, planting them in the Promised Land, but they refused to obey Him (cf. Jer 11:3-4, 7, 10). In this example, in spite of the expectation of good fruit, the disobedient Jewish nation has produced corrupt fruit; therefore, God proclaims judgment of “fire” and “broken branches” on the nation.

The message in Jeremiah is similar to the message that John the Baptist is proclaiming to the leaders of the Jewish nation when he warns that the ax is ready to cut down the trees<sup>5</sup> (Mt 3:10). Although one might generally not expect Gentile nations to produce good fruit, good fruit is expected of the Jewish nation because they were chosen to be God’s covenant people.

What fruit would one expect the Jewish nation to produce? Jeremiah has answered this question: one would expect the tree (nation) to produce good fruit—believers who are faithful to God and obedient to His will. As already mentioned, God judged the nation in Jeremiah’s day because it had not produced good fruit. Here, John the Baptist declares that, since the nation has once again failed to produce good fruit, it will be cut down to its root and, like other worthless things, will be cast into a fire.

Toward the end of His ministry, Jesus also employs a fig tree as a metaphor for the Jewish nation. Seeing a tree full of green leaves but having no fruit, He pronounces judgment on the tree: “‘Let no fruit grow on you ever again.’ Immediately the tree withered away” (Mt 21:19). Undoubtedly, Jesus is demonstrating God’s disappointment with the Jewish nation, because the nation should be full of believers who are faithful to God and eager to accept His Messiah. From a distance the nation looks like a healthy, green, and growing tree, because so many of its citizens are concerned with keeping the Old Covenant Law. Upon closer inspection, the nation has produced little or no good fruit, becoming disobedient to the point that they are rejecting the Messiah whom God has sent;

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<sup>5</sup> This warning likely includes the judgment of all nations during the Tribulation, when the Messiah “baptizes . . . with fire” (Mt 3:11).

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consequently, God's judgment is about to fall upon the Jewish nation.

### “Burning up the Chaff”

John the Baptist's third parable concerning the importance of repentance describes why the Jews must personally change their thinking: they must become “inward/spiritual Jews” producing good fruit if they want to be gathered into the Kingdom of God; if they fail to do so, they will be excluded from His kingdom. As previously explained, simply being physical descendants of Abraham is not enough; they must also become spiritual descendants of Abraham and “produce fruit [works] worthy of repentance” (Mt 3:8). In this parable, John the Baptist uses a metaphor of “wheat and chaff” to illustrate what will happen to God's covenant people, both those who accept the Messiah's new way and obediently produce fruit and those who reject the new way of the Messiah and are not obedient.

John the Baptist tells his audience: “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance” (Mt 3:11), using the symbol of baptism to demonstrate readiness to change from the old way to the new way. Then, preparing the way of the Messiah, John directs their attention to Jesus Christ:

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 with fire. His winnow 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 (Mt 3:11-12).

In this passage, John the Baptist describes two types of baptisms connected with the Messiah: one by the Holy Spirit, the other by fire. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is associated with the Messiah's first coming and His establishment of the New Covenant on the Day of Pentecost, while the second baptism, the one by fire, is related to the Messiah's second coming and final preparations for His kingdom.

As already mentioned, Jeremiah and Ezekiel prophesied concerning the New Covenant, emphasizing the Spirit of God

who will write the New Law on believers' hearts. Jesus prophesies that the Holy Spirit will come and baptize His disciples, calling this baptism "the promise of the Father" (Ac 1:4-5; cf. Lk 11:13; Jn 7:39; 14:26; 15:26; 16:13). After Christ's death and resurrection, His disciples receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, which baptism is also a sign that the New Covenant has begun and is in full effect. As Peter preaches to the multitude of Jews gathered in Jerusalem on that day, he explains that this baptism of the Spirit is the fulfillment of God's promise:

"And it shall come to pass in the last days," says God, "that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. . . I will pour out My Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy. . . . And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved" (Ac 2:17-21).

The second type of baptism involves judgment by fire and is related to the second coming of the Messiah: "His winnow 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" (Mt 3:12). This parable also emphasizes the production of good fruit (wheat) and describes a place of judgment (the threshing floor). The good fruit is gathered and protected in the barn, but the chaff, which is worthless, is burned in a fire. This parable can be applied to the people of God as a whole or individually.

If John's parable of the wheat being gathered and brought into the barn is applied generally to the covenant people of God, then it describes those who have been obedient being gathered into the messianic kingdom (cf. Mt 24:31). In contrast, burning the chaff describes those covenant people who have been disobedient being cast outside<sup>6</sup> of the messianic kingdom where worthless things are burned.

If this judgment by fire is applied to God's covenant people individually, then it is describing the Bema Seat Judgment of

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<sup>6</sup> This illustration is similar to Jesus' use of Gehenna to illustrate the place outside Jerusalem where worthless disciples will be sent (Mt 5:22, 29, 30).

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Jesus Christ. Paul writes about the Bema Seat Judgment, when a believer's works will be judged: "For all of us must appear before the Bema Seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done while in his body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2Co 5:10). In a previous letter, Paul describes how the works of believers will be tested by fire at the Bema Seat Judgment:

Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire (1Co 3:12-15).

Similar to John the Baptist in the parable of "Burning up the Chaff," Paul emphasizes that if a believer's works are worthless, like chaff, the fire will destroy them (and the believer will lose his rewards). Indeed, before a believer can do good works which are pleasing to God, he must change his way of thinking and bear fruit in accordance to Christ's New Covenant. Only then will a believer's good works withstand the fiery judgment at Christ's Bema Seat.