

## **“The Wild Man of Christmas”**

**Luke 3:7-18**

([www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=luke+3:7-18](http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=luke+3:7-18))

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### **John the Baptist is the ‘wild man’ of Christmas!**

In the first *Lethal Weapon* movie, Mel Gibson plays a cop who is wild with grief over the death of his young wife. In the beginning of the movie he goes up onto a roof with the mission of talking a potential jumper off the roof. He does get him down. Mel jumps with him into a waiting air bag some twenty stories below. The jumper yells out after he is on the ground, “Get me away from him! He’s crazy, man!” Wild men are often used by artists to teach us something about ourselves.

Consider one of our most lovable wild men, Forrest Gump. Forrest lived on the edge of our carefully prescribed culture. Forrest’s innocent living comes off wild when compared with the more upstanding leaders of the community. Yet, Forrest teaches us something about ourselves. He even teaches us God’s first name.

Forrest Gump died and went to Heaven. Saint Peter met him at the Pearly Gates and said, “Well, Forrest, it’s certainly good to see you. We have heard a lot about you. I must inform you, though, that Heaven is filling up fast and, lately, we’ve been administering an entrance examination for everyone. The test is fairly short, but you must pass it before you can enter the gates of Heaven.”

“It shore is good to be here, Saint Peter,” responded Forrest. “Ah’ve been looking forward to this. But nobuddy ever told me about no entrance exams. Ah shore hope the test ain’t too hard; lahf itself was a big enough test even though it was lahk a box of chawkalits.”

Saint Peter continued: “Yes, I know, Forrest. But, the test I have for you is only three questions. What days of the week begin with the letter T, how many seconds are there in a year, and what is God’s first name?”

Forrest went away to think the questions over. Later he returned and told Saint Peter he was ready to answer the questions. Saint Peter smiled and asked, “OK, Forrest, what are the answers?”

Forrest said, “Wahl, the first one wuz easy. The days uv the week thet begin with T are t’day an’ t’mora.” The saint’s eyes opened wide and he exclaimed. “Forrest! That’s not what I was thinking but you do have a point. I guess I didn’t specify what I meant so I’ll give you credit for that answer. How about the second question?”

“Now thet wun’s a little harder.” said Forrest. “Ah thunk and thunk about thet wun, an’ ah reckon the only answer is thet thar are twelve seconds in a year.” Astounded, Saint Peter asked, “Twelve?! Twelve?! Forrest, how in Heaven’s name could you come up with twelve seconds in a year?” Forrest smiled and said, “Why shucks, it’s January the second, February the second, March the second...” “Hold it,” interrupted Saint Peter. “I see where you’re going and, even though that isn’t quite what I had in mind, I’ll give you credit for that one too. Now, how about the third question.”

Forrest said, “Why shucks, Saint Peter. Everbuddy knows God’s first name is Howard.” “Howard?” asked Saint Peter. “What makes you think it’s ‘Howard’?” Forrest answered, “Why it’s in the prayer.” “The prayer?” asked Saint Peter. “Which prayer?” “Why the Lord’s Prayer,” responded Forrest: “Our Father, who are in heaven, Howard be thy name...”

There are wild men in the movies. And, there are wild men in Holy Scripture. In Luke’s gospel we have a picture of the “wild man of Christmas.” His name is John. He comes out of the Judean wilderness around the Great Salt Sea. He is wearing a hair skin cloak. He eats a weird diet of grasshoppers and honey. John is living on the edge of the respectable people of Jericho. His message is tough, harsh, and to the point. Biblical scholars think that John was a member of the Qum Ran community located just south of the inlet of the Jordan River. John is probably an Essene. One of the group of people who were committed to cleansing the Jerusalem Temple of its Roman taint. John has something to say to everyone.

John speaks to the self-satisfied Jews who think they have a wide super highway into God's favor. John tells them that their heritage and tradition are not worth a rock. They are to begin to live God's way as part of a renewed Israel. They have a choice: either respond to God's way of living or face certain destruction.

John speaks to the crowds, the tax collectors, and the soldiers. His message is similar to each of them. The crowds are probably ordinary people; they should have selfless concern for the disadvantaged. The tax collectors and the soldiers are to live impeccably honest lives.

John answers their unspoken question. He is not the Messiah. But, Messiah is coming soon. They are all to be prepared to follow God's new leader in God's new kingdom.

The wild man is interesting because he is different. His message is upsetting. John is worth going out to see. Jericho is on fire with stories about him. He is the favorite past time. Some are even listening. Our wild man of Scripture is speaking God's truth. God's Messiah will come! And, true to the message Messiah did show up. We are celebrating the truth of John's message this Christmas season. Jesus the Christ did come. Jesus did bring God's Kingdom into a reality.

What Christ proclaims is not the Kingdom of Hell, though Jesus knows that hell exists. Jesus Christ comes to proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven is amongst us right now! The Good News of Christmas is that our real, authentic life is in and through Jesus Christ. We are invited to live life so that God's great Kingdom becomes a reality in our lives. Christ's message is of abundant, heavenly life available here and now.

*"For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ."* I Corinthians 15:22

([www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=1+corinthians+15:22](http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=1+corinthians+15:22))

*"For God so loved the world...not wishing that anyone will die."* John 3:16

([www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=john+3:16](http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=john+3:16))

God's will for us does not include hell, and no where does the Scripture proclaim that the Kingdom of hell is at hand. If you end up in hell, that is your choice, not God's!

## **Hell does indeed exist!**

When we are connected with God's goodness, grace, and love, then we call into judgment any present or future that we construct apart from God's kingdom. The wanting and seeking of our own kingdom come, our thousand year Reich, our future, not God's—this destiny we make for ourselves separated from God is hell. That is why hell means going it alone, apart from God, all the way to the bitter end. The reality of God allowing us to create our own hell is why John says that God's Messiah will hold us accountable. We construct hell by our choices.

Jim Moore is senior minister of St. Luke's in Houston, Texas. At a breakfast with a friend, who is now a sales representative for a large national company, the friend told Dr. Moore about a recent exchange with his new sales manager.

It seems Moore's friend was driving his new boss around town when they happened to pass near the friend's home. This friend asked the new sales manager if he would like to stop by his house and meet his family. His wife was baking an apple pie, and his children would be coming in from school. Would he like to meet them?

"Let's get one thing straight right now," the manager replied. "I'm not interested in your family. I'm not interested in your wife or your children. I'm not interested in you personally at all or any of the circumstances of your life. All I'm interested in are results. All I'm interested in about you is your sales record!"

The friend told Moore: "That really hurt. I felt as though someone had slapped me across the face, but you know, I realized something. I realized that God is the opposite of that! God is interested in my home and family. God is interested in my wife and children. God does care about me personally. He is interested in all of the circumstances of my life." (James W. Moore, *Christmas Gifts That Always Fit* (Nashville: Dimensions for the Living, 1996), 64-65.)

Hell is living focused on the secondary and ignoring the primary aspects of life. Hell is living as if God does not exist, when it is God who keeps your existence in the palm of God's hand. Hell is living now and in eternity cut off from God by your own pride and prejudice.

John the Baptist points out to anyone who will hear that personal heritage, wealth, and status mean nothing. John the Baptist challenges the people who hear him to live with integrity giving God glory! John the Baptist points out that each person has a choice!

### **Jesus comes to give you a repentance opportunity!**

You have a choice, a life changing choice. Your choice is a one time decision to trust in God. And, your choice is an everyday reaffirmation of your choice in the small day by day decisions that count. You can choose to live with Christ in your life and grow God's Kingdom everyday. Or you can choose to grow your own hell.

Unfortunately, none of us are pure in our choices. We are all guilty ignoring Christ in the every day and creating our own messy hell on earth. Because we falter and fail so often, we need to hear the message of the wild man this Christmas and every Christmas.

Repent. He says. Repent means choose differently. Repent means turn around and go in another direction. Repent of your addiction to the adrenalin of fear and judgment. Repent of your lust for more of everything. Repent of your large and small dishonesty.

John points to the One who is coming from God to bring true repentance. John humbly says that he is not worthy to even tie his shoes. The Messiah is coming bringing God's message of hope, reconciliation, peace, and joy. Repent and be able to receive God's gifts, John shouts to the crowd and to us!

We need to hear John's challenge of repentance so that we can commit our lives to Christ and to the joyous ministry of building God's Kingdom right here and right now. Only those persons who know themselves in need of repenting and accepting God's forgiveness can be strong builders. G.K. Chesterton speaks to us of our need to know ourselves. "No man's really any good till he knows how bad he is, or might be;

- till he's realized little right he has to all the snobbery, and sneering and talking about 'criminals' as if they were apes in a forest ten thousand miles away;
- till he's gotten rid of all the dirty self-deception of talking about low types and deficient skulls;
- till he's squeezed out of his soul the very last drop of the oil of the Pharisees;
- till his only hope is somehow or other to have captured one criminal and kept him safe and sane under his own hat."

John's message of repentance is for you! If you have not chosen to follow Christ with your life, then the message of repentance is clear and unmistakable! Now is the time to repent and follow Jesus Christ. If you have made the big decision for Christ with your life, but you still find yourself creating hell on earth for yourself and others around you, then today is a good day for a renewed repentance and recommitment to Christ.

### **We are called to help grow God's Kingdom of Grace!**

Karl Barth, the great German theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century said, "Grace precedes repentance" We must feel the firm, unconditional grace of God before we have the strength to confess. Security breeds honesty. Insecurity fosters deceit.

Listen once more to the "Wild Man of Christmas." Hear his challenge to live differently. Now respond by choosing to grow God's Kingdom of Grace in your home, neighborhood, job, school, and church.

Let us all hear God's judgment upon us through John's words and respond by choosing to grow our lives using Jesus Christ as our model. Let us respond to God's love by growing in our love for God and for all others. Let us build up God's kingdom through our small choices each day. How we choose to live, to spend our money, to use our time, to educate our children all has a profound impact on whether God's kingdom increases or decreases. Let us join the "Wild Man of Christmas" on the edge of society and choose to grow God's kingdom each day.