

Stranger Saying No. 1 – “*You brood of vipers who warned you to flee from the wrath to come!*” (Luke 3:7)

John says these words to “the crowds coming out to be baptized by him,” that is, people seeking to prepare themselves for the coming of the Messiah. What a strange way to begin a sermon? Didn't these words run the risk of alienating the people towards whom they were directed? *You brood of vipers* – here John is likening his fellow Jewish brothers and sisters to “a bunch of poisonous snakes!” Does he really mean that?

These words are **typical** of the Jewish prophets who often used hyperbole, exaggeration, and wildly abstract and harsh language to “**jolt**” their hearers out of their sinful ways and thinking. Since the beginning of time and the Garden of Eden, the snake (also called a viper or serpent) has been a symbol of evil, craftiness, deceit, lying, cheating, and selfishness. These are the very qualities of sin that John believes alienate the Jewish people from their God. It is this very sinfulness that angers God and kindles his wrath against His human creation.

Who among us hasn't at one time or another engaged in these kinds of sin? They are symptoms of our alienation from God. John is asking the people: Is your desire for forgiveness **sincere**? Or are you simply **faking repentance** in order that you might escape God's punishment? John's words are a call to **honest reflection** ... a call to recognize and wrestle with our own wickedness, disobedience and rebellion, so that we come to a **genuine desire to repent** of (that is, turn away from) those sins. This genuineness is manifest in a feeling of sorrow. John is asking, “Do you truly feel sorry for your sins against God? And for the hurt and suffering you have caused your fellow humans?” **Sorrow is the mark of true repentance.**