

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Broadcast Date: 1 May 2016

No. T0935

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Luke's Gospel: John the Baptist's Ministry (Luke 3:1-20)

In August 2015, we commenced a study of Luke's Gospel covering Luke 1:1-2:52. Over the next six weeks we will continue that study and we start today with Luke 3:1-20, which describe the ministry of John the Baptist. Let's divide these verses into five sections:

1. The historical setting of his ministry (Luke 3:1-2);
2. His commission from God (Luke 3:3-6);
3. His preaching (Luke 3:7-14);
4. His confession of Christ (Luke 3:15-17);
5. The end of his ministry (Luke 3:18-20).

1. The historical setting of John the Baptist's ministry (Luke 3:1-2)

As a historian, Luke identifies the very year¹ that John started to preach. It was *"in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests"* (Luke 3:1-2). It was a spiritually low point in Israel's history. So low in fact that it was necessary for the coming of Messiah to be preceded by a spiritual reawakening. His forerunner was tasked with this ministry, as we shall see in section 2. In his book 'Israel and the Nations', the late Professor FF Bruce explains the complex political situation in Israel that had arisen due to Herod the Great. By the genius of his statesmanship, he enjoyed close alliances with the Caesars of his life time and was able to extend his kingdom. His will then determined the subsequent division of the kingdom amongst his three sons upon his death in 4 BC. Essentially, they were only puppet kings, who, like their father, were usurpers of the true Davidic throne. They were disliked by the Jews because they were of Edomite descent. Herod's son, Archelaus, inherited Judea but he only reigned for nine years until AD 6, when he was banished by Caesar Augustus. Judea was then downgraded to a second-class province to be directly governed by the Emperor's appointed procurator. God thus ensured that there was no rival to the true King, when His public ministry began shortly after John's!

By naming the Roman governors first, Luke shows the iron grip with which the nation was held in subjugation. By naming the religious leaders last, and by stating that there were two high priests instead of one operating the priesthood, Luke indicates that Israel was also in religious disorder. Furthermore, the high priest's office had been corrupted to become that of a political ruling class. High priests were appointed by the Herod family kings of Judea and then, in John's day, by the Roman governors.

All these different rulers were great men of the world. But they were wicked, unscrupulous men in God's eyes. Therefore He chose His own messenger, John the Baptist. Luke 1 identified him as the son of Zacharias and Elizabeth, who were told before his birth of his special mission. *"He will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He also will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord"* (Luke 1:14-17). The chapter ends by describing his upbringing in a place of separation, away from the spiritually corrupt masses of Israel. *"The child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel"* (Luke 1:80).

2. John the Baptist's commission from God (Luke 3:3-6)

Nothing further is recorded of John's early life. Luke 3:2 picks up from Luke 1:80 and finished with the poignant words, *"the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness."* He was directed by God to leave the wilderness and to go into the entire region around the river Jordan. His job was to preach *"a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins"* (Luke 3:3). Prophets of Old Testament times had reasoned and pleaded with their fellow countrymen to return to the LORD and to the Law of the Covenant, which they had repeatedly broken. John's commission was different. The people's apostasy caused God to demand, through John, their repentance. They were to acknowledge their hopelessly lost position before God. Their failure to keep the Law was to be admitted by baptism.

If they took to heart John's exhortations and expressed their repentance through baptism, they would receive the forgiveness of sins and be morally prepared to receive Messiah when He appeared. Each of the synoptic Gospel writers recognised that John's ministry was in accord with Isaiah prophecy in Isaiah 40. In Luke 3:1-2, Isaiah provided comfort to any of God's people found grieving over their sins and the sinful state of Israel. These Gospel writers saw the fulfilment of Isaiah 40:3-5 in John's ministry. For example, Luke 3:4-6, "*as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough ways smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"*"

Moreover, the prophecy of Isaiah clearly states in Isaiah 40:9-11 that the LORD, that is, Jehovah, would come immediately after Isaiah 40:3-5 were fulfilled. In their songs of thanksgiving and praise in Luke 1 and Luke 2, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon and Anna acknowledged the Child Jesus to be the promised Messiah. But Luke 3:6 concludes with an amazing statement. The salvation He brought could not be confined to the repentant remnant, or within the narrow boundaries of Israel. This salvation would be made available and offered to "*all flesh*". The abounding and overflowing grace of God to all nations of the world is one of the special characteristics of Luke's writings.

In John's lifetime, whenever a king was to make a royal visit, elaborate preparations were made to make his approach as direct as possible and his journey as comfortable as possible - the highways were smoothed out. Isaiah prophesied this would also happen for Jehovah. Zechariah 14:4-5 show that this will physically happen at the Lord's second coming in glory and power. But it happened spiritually, when the people repented following John's exhortations. For them, it was not a matter of repairing literal roads, but of preparing their hearts to receive Messiah. Although John was a single voice crying out from the Judean wilderness, his ministry was an effectual spiritual preparation for the public manifestation of Christ. Thus, interpreting Luke 3:5 in a spiritual way, we can say that:

- "*Every valley was filled*" - those who were truly repentant and humbled received the salvation of the Lord. They were both saved and satisfied; raised up from the depths of spiritual distress and despair that Israel's apostasy had brought in.
- "*Every mountain and hill was brought low*" - haughty and arrogant people, like the scribes and Pharisees, were truly humbled.
- "*The crooked places were made straight*" - dishonest and fraudulent people, like the tax collectors, became reformed characters, whose practices changed. They were "straightened out".
- "*The rough ways were made smooth*" - soldiers and others with rough, crude temperaments were tamed and refined.

3. John the Baptist's Preaching (Luke 3:7-14)

Luke 7:26-28 describe the Lord's assessment and commendation of John the Baptist. Luke and the other Gospel writers also see him unique amongst the prophets of God because he heralded the new dispensation of the Christ. (Hence Luke's elaboration of the historical dates in Luke 3:1-2). John's preaching was also special, when compared to former prophets, in that he proclaimed "*a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins*" (Luke 3:3). Matthew 3:2 records that John's message was "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" Repentance was to be demonstrated by baptism. Thus he opened up the way for the Lord's ministry. In Luke 3, Luke identifies the different groups of people who came to be baptised of him. There were the multitudes (Luke 3:7-11), the tax collectors (Luke 3:12-13) and the soldiers (Luke 3:14). He told each group what "*a baptism of repentance*" actually meant for them. It was to be a thorough change of lifestyle.

He told the ordinary Jewish people, who formed the crowds, that the baptism he preached was more than a religious ceremony. He addressed them, "*Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*" (Luke 3:7). As Israelites they prided themselves in being Abraham's children, who would be delivered from their enemies, and liberated from the occupying Roman power, by Messiah. John shocked them by saying their confidence in their natural lineage did not absolve them from the judgement of God. Then he warned them of its imminence. In fact, the judgement was so near for them that the axe, as it were, was already poised at the root of their trees. They would only escape God's wrath if their own trees bore "*fruits worthy of repentance*" (Luke 3:8). Also, God was able to provide children for Abraham from the surrounding inanimate stones (Luke 3:8).

John's Spirit-filled words convicted the people and produced genuine repentance. They asked, "*What shall we do then?*" (Luke 3:10). That is, they wanted to know how to "*bear fruits worthy of repentance*" (Luke 3:8). John told them that God required them to change their morals and to start to live in a new way. They were to share their clothing and their food with the poor, who had neither. In other words they must show their generosity to one another by so-called "works of love." They were to love their neighbours as themselves, as required by Leviticus 19:18.

One final point about the crowds and the way John addressed them, "*Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*" (Luke 3:7). Matthew 3:7 records his description of the Pharisees and Sadducees, who came to him for baptism, was exactly the same. The Pharisees and Sadducees were the religious leaders. Like vipers, they were evil and destructive in character. Their teachings had so poisoned the ordinary people that they, too, had become characterised by self-righteousness and covetousness. Later in the Lord's ministry, He denounced the doctrines of these leaders and stated that God would hold them responsible for leading the nation astray from the true meaning of the Law.

Luke 3:12-13 records that the tax collectors also came to be baptised by John. They, too, asked him what "*fruits worthy of repentance*" they should exhibit. He told this group, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you" (Luke 3:13). Tax collectors were disliked by the Jews for two reasons.

1. They worked for the occupying Roman government;
2. They were greedy and charged the people more than they were authorised to do.

Since they were notoriously crooked, straightforward honesty would be a very definite evidence of the reality of their baptism.

Soldiers formed the third group of people who came to be baptised by John. They also asked him how they should behave to bear "*fruits worthy of repentance*" (Luke 3:8). He responded, "*Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages*" (Luke 3:14). If they avoided these three sins of extortion, slander, and discontent, which were common to men serving in the Roman military, there would be the outward evidences that they had truly repented. It's interesting that Luke mentions this third group for they were Gentiles. It's in keeping with the way he quotes Isaiah 40:5, "*all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*" He sees "*all flesh*" to be the whole world of lost mankind.

At this point in my talk, you may be asking how the ministry of John the Baptist can be applied to us in the twenty-first century. One issue, which is immediately apparent, is that Great Britain is certainly like Israel in John's day! Christendom is in a similar apostate condition. Therefore, we should cry to the Lord to provide, call and send preachers of John's calibre, who charge their hearers to repent. Like John, they won't attract the world's popularity, acclaim, or respect. They will only be "*a voice crying in the wilderness*" (Luke 3:4). But ordinary Christians also need to have courage to point out, and to speak out against, the sins of our generation. And we can be bold because we know people can be rescued from sin and its consequences by the power of the Gospel. The sins of our society are much the same as were evident during John's ministry: self-righteousness, self-seeking and greed, which arise from discontentment. Not to mention the more obvious issues which fill our law courts from the prevalence of dishonesty, extortion and violence in society! Perhaps we need always to include the call to repent in our preaching of the Gospel. The scriptural order is that, in conversion, true repentance precedes faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (see Acts 20:21).

4. John the Baptist's confession of Christ (Luke 3:15-17)

In addition to the formation of a repentant remnant through John's baptism, his ministry caused much speculation in Israel. "*Now as the people were in expectation, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ or not*" (Luke 3:15). John's Gospel 1:19 states that the religious authorities sent a delegation from Jerusalem to determine who John the Baptist was. He responded to all this speculation and interrogation and declared that he was definitely not the Christ. His humble answer was to turn their attention from himself to Christ. "*I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire*" (Luke 3:16). Thus John completed his commission from God and stepped into the background to make way for the Lord Jesus. He not only faithfully pointed others to the Messiah, but he did not, even for one moment, permit the people to think great things of himself. Here's the great secret of any true Christian service: the hearers must be attracted to Christ by the preaching and not to the preacher of the Good News. John the Baptist made it abundantly clear that he was merely a humble servant of this great Person. He was so humble that he felt unworthy to perform the very menial service of untying the strap of Messiah's sandals.

He proclaimed and emphasised that Christ was the Coming One. Matthew 3:11 and Mark 1:7 both state that John said this One was coming after him. The Apostle John goes further in his Gospel and records that John the Baptist actually said that Christ was already amongst them, but unknown to them (John 1:26). So great was this Coming One that, in contrast to John's water baptism, He would baptise people with the Holy Spirit and with fire! What did John mean?

First, we know that Christ baptised believers with the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost and sometime later on in Cornelius' house (see Acts 2:33 and Acts 11:15-17). The doctrine that believers were baptised into the body of Christ by, or in, one Spirit is explained in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13.

Second, from Luke 3:17, it is clear that the baptism of fire is a baptism of judgment. There the Lord is pictured as a winnowing of grain. As He tosses the grain into the air, the chaff is blown to the sides of the threshing floor. Then it is swept up and burned, a clear picture of the searching or consuming judgement of God committed into the hands of the Son of Man (see John 5:22). As no true believer will ever experience the 'baptism of fire', we can assert that the baptism of fire awaits the second Coming of Christ. However, John the Baptist did not distinguish between the two Advents of Christ because he was concentrating on convincing his audience of the superlative greatness of the Person of Christ.

5. The end of John the Baptist's ministry (Luke 3:18-20)

"And with many other exhortations he preached to the people. But Herod the tetrarch, being rebuked by him concerning Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, and for all the evils which Herod had done, also added this, above all, that he shut John up in prison" (Luke 3:18-20). With these verses, Luke deviates from the historical order of Gospel events and dramatically brings the account of the ministry of John the Baptist to an abrupt conclusion. But we can see the spiritual and moral reasons for this: he wanted to introduce the ministry of the perfect Man, Jesus Christ. Elijah-like John disappears and Luke turns the spotlight from John to Jesus, in whom the grace of God resided. Therefore, in (Luke 3:18-19), he summarises the remainder of John's ministry and carries us forward to the time of his imprisonment by Herod, which actually took place about eighteen months later. But we should not miss the climax of John's ministry - that he baptised the Lord Jesus (Luke 3:20-21). But that's next week's talk, God willing.

In Luke 3:18, the English Standard Version stresses the fact that John actually preached good news. At first sight that might seem strange but his ministry was to introduce Christ. Everything about Christ is good news to those who accept Him. In Luke 3:19, we learn that John had rebuked Herod for all of his evil ways of living and especially for his adulterous marriage to his sister-in-law, Herodias. John's faithfulness to God's law caused him to confront Herod. *"It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife"* (Mark 6:18b). The wording in Mark 6:18a, *"John had been saying..."* implies that he kept on reminding Herod of this fact. Luke 3:20 informs us that Herod, as an outcome, feared John as a holy prophet. But although his conscience was reached, Herod was unwilling to repent, preferring to indulge in the pleasures of sin. Compounding this weakness were the persistent demands of Herodias. She wanted John silenced and so Herod crowned all his other evil deeds by shutting John up in prison. The narrative of Luke's Gospel leaves him there until Luke 7:18-35. But, as I finish today's talk, the faithfulness of John challenges us:

- Do we live up to our calling by God to faithfully preach Christ?
- Are we prepared to remain true to God's word and to stand against all of the evils of our day?
- Are we living in righteous ways which complement and correspond to our confession of Christ and our preaching of righteousness?

Note

¹The fifteenth year of Tiberius was either AD 27-28 or AD 28-29 due to different methods of calculating dates in Roman times, which cause the slight uncertainty. Pilate was governor of Judea AD 26-36. (Reference: New Bible Commentary, Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham, England, 2011 reprint, page 986.)

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