

4. John The Baptist Prepares the Way

Luke 3:1-20

Luke: A Walk Through the Life of Jesus

After describing in detail Jesus' birth and early years, Luke now turns his attention to share with his readers the events and circumstances, which led up to the public ministry of Jesus: John the Baptist's ministry in preparing hearts to receive Christ's ministry (Luke 3:1-20), the baptism of Jesus (Luke 3:21-22), Christ's genealogy proving his right to the throne of David (Luke 3:23-38), and the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13). We can gather rich lessons from looking at the early ministry of Jesus and John that will light the way for us to follow in our own walk with God.

Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness (Luke 3:1-3).

Luke now anchors the beginning of the ministry of John the Baptist to a specific time period. He sets the scene by again giving us the dark political landscape during the time of Jesus and John. Notice that Tiberius Caesar was now on the throne of Rome, succeeding Augustus Caesar. Herod the Great had died in 4 BC, and his son, Herod Antipas, was given a third of his land, becoming a tetrarch in Galilee (a tetrarch was a ruler over a third of a territory). Pontius Pilate, a Roman governor, had taken rule over the territory of Judea, which included Jerusalem (v. 1). We are also told of two high priests, Annas and Caiaphas (v. 2). Caiaphas had been appointed high priest by Rome, after his father-in-law Annas was deposed. However, Annas was still holding on to the reigns of power, like a family godfather, ruling through Caiaphas.

Corruption was at an all-time high with the religious leaders being the crime bosses, raking in money through their financial schemes in the temple courts itself! However, God had a man in place—John the Baptist – who would abhor anything to do with their corrupt schemes and would not hesitate to speak out against the corruption. Two bright lights were about to shine in the midst of this darkness: Jesus, who would arrive on the scene shortly, and his cousin, John, who would bear testimony to the ministry of Jesus. Where evil seems to pervade a society, God always has a man (or woman) that He raises up to bring things into the light. The brightest of lights was about to pierce the darkness.

The Dry Barren Wilderness: The Place God Speaks

Notice in verse 2, Luke tells us where the Word of the Lord came to John. God's Word came to him in the barren dry wilderness of the Jordan Valley, as the river snakes its way down from Galilee to the Dead Sea. From Jerusalem, it was quite a trek, about fifteen miles from the watershed of the mountains of Judea, 3,800 feet above sea level. The Dead Sea area is actually the lowest place on Earth at 1,800 feet below sea level! It's interesting that the Hebrew word, *midbar*, is the word translated *desert*. It is also the root for the Hebrew word, *medibear*, which means *to speak*. We often go through dry times in our Christian lives when we wonder why God

would put us through a dry desert experience. We may wonder, “God, why have you allowed this to happen to me?” We wonder where God has gone. In actual fact, it is the place where God wants to speak to us. If we will still our hearts at that moment, we may find that it is the closest that we have ever been to God in those low times. The Psalmist said, “**The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit**” (Psalm 34:18). Moses wrote prophetically about the nation of Israel when they were led into the desert. He said:

¹⁰In a desert land he found him, in a barren and howling waste. He shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as the apple of his eye, ¹¹like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them on its pinions. ¹²The LORD alone led him; no foreign god was with him (Deuteronomy 32:10-12).

It was the desert land experience that brought Israel into a deeper walk with God. If you are in a place which seems spiritually barren and dry, see it as your opportunity to cry out to Him and draw near to His heart. It’s the very place where He wants to speak. He will kick away all the crutches on which we have leaned so that we might totally rely on Him as Israel had done in the wilderness. God will speak if we are ready to listen.

Can you think of a time in your life when you were at the end of your strength and reached out to God in your distress? Can you briefly describe what happened as a result?

We do not know how people were being led to John the Baptist in the middle of the wilderness, but they came in a steady stream and were drawn to the truth that he spoke. The Holy Spirit was at work, preparing the ground of people’s hearts to receive the Word of God, Jesus. People were being drawn from Judea and Jerusalem to listen to this most radical of preachers. John preached a baptism of repentance, and he urged people to turn their hearts to God. In times of revival when the Spirit of God is moving in a powerful way, people will go miles to hear true biblical teaching from a man of God with integrity. John roots his ministry in God’s prophetic word through Isaiah:

³And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. ⁵Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. ⁶And all people will see God’s salvation.” ⁷So he *began* saying to the crowds who were going out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸“Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father,’ for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹“Indeed the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:3-9).

In those days, when a king was coming to a particular land, his servants would visit first and command that the roads be repaired so that there were no potholes, fallen rocks on the road, or if the road needed to be widened for the king’s chariot to get through. The roads were to be straight

and the way was to be made smooth. John preaches that the way must be prepared for the Messiah. Verse 3 tells us that his ministry was one of a baptism of repentance.

Why was John's ministry of a baptism of repentance so important? How do you think this prepared the way for the ministry of Christ?

John was talking about the roadblocks of people's hearts. Not only can our inner mind and heart become corrupted by images we have seen and felt from the media but also from the outflow of a life that we inherited from Adam that is sinful. ¹⁸"But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. ¹⁹For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. ²⁰These are the things which defile the man..." (Matthew 5:18-20). This was what offended Israel's leaders—they didn't see their need of repentance. They were fully committed to keeping the Law, not seeing that the Law of God was not given to be the standard by which to live but that it was given to show the people of God how far short we fall from fulfilling the Law's requirements.

Has anyone ever kept the law? How is it possible to, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all of your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). We need a new life, a life that the Son of God came to give (John 10:10), not a dressed-up version of the life we have inherited from Adam, not a version of Your Best Life Now, as if Christianity is all about being a "better you." No, the way of Christ is for our flesh, our sinful nature, to be crucified with Christ. Paul the apostle wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

Satan has constructed many road blocks on the way, in order to hinder the King's journey to fill completely your inner life with His peace and joy. Repentance is the only way to clear out the baggage that is in our way. Your baggage is anything that would keep you from letting go of your old life, which is ruled by self. Christ offers a new life, but we must let go of those things that would hold us back. Before you can walk forward with Jesus, there are things you must leave behind.

Repentance is properly understood to mean a change of mind--a change of the intention from wanting to sin to not wanting to sin--that results in a change in action. It involves the decision to make a change of behavior and/or attitude about something. Biblically, repentance means to turn from sin with a heartfelt desire to change and not repeat the same behavior again. Of course, desiring to never sin again and actually not sinning again aren't always the same thing. In our experience, we sometimes fail in our war with sin (Romans 7:19). We may have remorse over it and honestly desire to not commit sin again, but because of our human weakness, we may at times fail to completely carry out the actions of repentance. Nevertheless, by the grace of God we are able to turn to Him yet again, reckoning ourselves dead to sin and alive to Christ. We come boldly before the throne of grace to receive mercy, and find grace to help in our time of need. (Hebrews 4:16). This does not mean that it is okay to go out and seek a sin and then try to repent of it later. There is a difference between (1) an honest struggle (which is a sign of regeneration) and (2) a casual attitude about committing sin so that a person can repent

later (a sign of not being regenerate).¹

For instance, there is the story of the lost son who wandered away from his father's home and went to a far country. At what point was he converted? Was it at the point of his speech to himself?

¹⁷When he came to his senses, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants." ²⁰So, he got up and went to his father (Luke 15:17-19).

I think that the real turning point came at verse seventeen when he took action to go home to his father. Lots of people say things to God, but He watches our actions. God knows every heart, regardless of the words we speak. Our actions will speak for what lies in our hearts. Some would excuse themselves from John's baptism of repentance because they were depending on their ethnic privileges, saying that, because they were descended from Abraham, they had God's favorite nation clause, and that they would be alright in the judgment. It is the same today. There are those who think that because they were born into a Christian family or a Christian country, they will be okay, but this lie will keep them from the truth.

Our enemy, Satan, uses this lie all the time to good effect. The best deception is one that looks closest to the truth. It is a deception to believe that one can get into heaven by any work other than receiving the finished work of Christ on the cross for you and as you. The Law was given to show you your need of a Savior. None of us in our own selves can keep the Law—we need a Savior to fulfill the law for us and deliver us from sin's penalty, viz. the One who completely paid sin's penalty in His own body on the tree. "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2:24). Christ is the only substitute for sin—there is no favorite nation clause in God's economy.

On the Day of Pentecost when Peter stood up and preached the Gospel, the Word of God being preached cut them to the heart. They responded, " 'Brothers, what shall we do?' Peter said to them, '**Repent**, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit' " (Acts 3:38). Mark records Jesus' first words of ministry this way; " 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. **Repent and believe** the good news!' " (Mark 1:15). The only way into the kingdom of God is repentance toward God and to receive the substitutionary death of Christ as God's payment for your sin. This is the way of salvation, i.e. receiving Christ into your life (John 1:12).

John tells us in verse eight, that there should be fruits of repentance. Being baptized does not change our hearts; it is just an outward symbol of an inward change. The inward change will have a lifestyle change accompanying it. Things will be different on the outside because of the change that has already occurred on the inside! True repentance will bring sorrow over sin. Our desires will be changed when we receive new life in Christ. Why would we want to stay chained

¹ Taken from the website of CARM, the Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry: <https://carm.org/what-is-repentance>

to our sin that destroys when we have been set free to live in the freedom that Christ died to give us?

What is meant by the term “the axe being already laid at the root of the trees?”

John gives a vivid picture of a servant about to cut down a tree. To get his chopping aim right, a man lays his axe blade on the root to be cut and steadies his footing before swinging the axe over his head to get a strong blow at the root. There are two ways of looking at this picture. 1) The picture is of a man or a nation (a nation is a collection of people with their corporate identity). If there is no repentance, the tree will be cut down and thrown into the fire as worthless. 2) The axe laid at the root could also be a picture of the work of Messiah, who, through our repentance and trust in Him, will lay His axe at the root of our sin problem, our root that we inherited from Adam. This is what Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans, “For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin” (Romans 6:6).

When we come to Christ we are born-again or born from above, and we receive new life in Christ. The axe laid at the root could also speak of cutting ourselves off from that which has fed our physical lusts and passions. Repentance, for John, meant much more than taking a dip in the Jordan and having a spiritual experience. It means an involvement of our will in changing one’s life. In all the categories of life—as a spouse, parent, roommate, employee, or boss—we are to practice our Christian beliefs, not just give verbal assent to them. If our repentance is true, then it will impact our lives in visible ways: in our giving, our attitudes, and our treatment of others.

It may begin with a sorrowful heart, but it must end with determined action; otherwise, it is not true biblical repentance and faith in Christ. Just as new life comes from a father and a mother, so repentance and faith in Christ brings about new life from above. Remorse is not repentance. Judas Iscariot had remorse, but he never repented. He could have fallen on his knees and begged God’s forgiveness, but he did not. He had fear of the consequences of his sin, which caused him to return the money to the Pharisees, but he never repented. Instead, he took his own life and died not in hope but in despair (Matthew 27:5-8).

John the Baptist’s methods were not seeker-sensitive, yet God greatly used him. Jesus, talking about John, said of him, “Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matthew 11:11).

Jesus said that before the Messiah came on the scene, there were none as great as John. What was it about John that made him so great?

John did the very opposite of the spirit of the age in which he lived. He didn’t care about the pomp or prestige of leadership. He was concerned about righteousness and godliness. He was a strong leader of great character. He offended the minds of the Sadducees, Pharisees, chief priests and scribes by not dressing and eating the way they did. He was not going to give way to corruption, so he lived a simple lifestyle: “John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a

leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey” (Mark 1:6). His ministry was “to clear the way” before the Lord, “to prepare the way,” and then to “get out of the way.”

¹⁰And the crowds were questioning him, saying, “Then what shall we do?” ¹¹And he would answer and say to them, “The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise.” ¹²And *some* tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” ¹³And he said to them, “Collect no more than what you have been ordered to.” ¹⁴*Some* soldiers were questioning him, saying, “And *what about us*, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse *anyone* falsely, and be content with your wages.” ¹⁵Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, ¹⁶John answered and said to them all, “As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷“His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” ¹⁸So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people. ¹⁹But when Herod the tetrarch was reprimanded by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the wicked things which Herod had done, ²⁰Herod also added this to them all: he locked John up in prison (Luke 3:1-20).

What is a winnowing fork? (v. 17). We don’t use those much these days. When the bundles of wheat were harvested, they were taken to the top of a hill, a threshing floor, where they separated the chaff from the wheat by means of beating it. Then a large winnowing fork was used to throw the bundles in the air, and the wind would blow the chaff down the hill, separating the wheat from what would be burned up. John is talking of a time at the end of the age when there will be a separation of those that are Christ’s from those who have refused His offer of mercy.

We read of John’s high estimation of the Messiah and of his low estimation of himself. In those days, only menial servants would take off the shoes of a person. John says that he is not worthy even to take off the Master’s shoes. This view of Christ is what makes this man so great in the eyes of God. A great leader may often be tempted to believe the good things that people will say about him or her. Such things are used of the enemy to puff up a leader if he will believe them.

However, John is small enough for God to use. He was a prophet and more than a prophet. He didn’t go to prophet Bible college, no, God led him into the quietness of the wilderness to speak to him and train him. He had passion that was marked by bravery. He would stand up to Herod and tell him he was committing adultery by marrying his brother’s wife, Herodias, and for that he was locked up in prison. How we need men and women like this in these dark days full of corruption in high places. His message was strong and bold, designed to shake people from a spiritual slumber in order for them to see that they were slaves to sin and needed to repent and change their ways.

John shocked the Jews, yes, even the religious leaders, by requiring them to be baptized. The kind of baptism he was performing was normally associated with the induction of proselytes, Gentiles (non-Jews) who were converting into Judaism. This attacked the Jewish pride.

They began to think that John was the Christ, the Promised One. John's answer was with a clear and humble "no." "I am not fit to untie the thong on his sandals." John pointed the people away from himself telling them about the Christ. When Jesus came on the scene and was baptized, John's role now was to hand his congregation over to Jesus.

²⁹The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰"This is He on behalf of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.' ³¹"I did not recognize Him, but so that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water."...(John 1:29-31).

Few men can do such a thing as giving away their congregation when they have had such a powerful ministry. We should have that same attitude in our hearts. Pointing others to Christ should be our mission, and this is what John did.

John the Baptist was not a prosperity preacher. Far from it. He did not promise a life full of victory and continual blessing and financial success. In today's terms, he may have been considered an eccentric doomsday preacher. Do you think you would have been attracted to a preacher who did these things?

- 1) John deliberately conducted his meetings in open fields, inviting people to sit on the hard ground, regardless of the elements, rain or shine.
- 2) John wore clothes that were dirty and made of camel hair, and he ate insects. He could hardly be called presentable or easy to whom to relate, yet people seemed to be intrigued by him.
- 3) He did not hesitate to insult his listeners by calling them a bunch of lily-livered snakes and talking about judgment all the time.
- 4) He embarrassed top-ranking government officials by exposing their shameful private secrets. He did not care about being popular or socially relevant.

Contrast this to the preaching that we hear today. It is a wonder that people came to hear him, but they did! The Spirit of the Lord was upon him, preparing a generation of people to usher in the kingdom of God. John was a voice in the wilderness that shook people's notions of true righteousness and truth. What do you think your reaction would have been if you would have come under the sound of his teaching? Some people would have concluded that he was a madman, with nothing worthwhile to say.

He was making an important point. In their mind, a Jew was exempt from judgment just because of the special relationship that he had with God. Being of the line of Abraham was not enough, according to John. John the Baptist called people to a relationship with God. He pointed the way to Jesus, who not only showed us the way to the Father, but made the way for us to be in relationship with the Father.

Prayer: God, give me sensitivity to hear You speak, regardless of who You use to reveal Your truth. Let me be quick to remove anything in my life that would hold me back from following You. Help me always to point the way to Jesus like Your servant John.

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