

John's Preaching in Preparation for the Coming One (Lk 3.1-20)

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In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." ⁷ He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." ¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" ¹¹ And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." ¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" ¹³ And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." ¹⁵ As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, ¹⁶ John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." ¹⁸ So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. ¹⁹ But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰ added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.

Introduction

It is evident that our text for today, Lk 3.1-20, has John the Baptist in "narrative spotlight." Luke has been going back and forth between John and Jesus because John is the one who prepares the road ahead of His coming. Returning to John, our author concentrates on how he does his work of preparation. He does it by preaching. He is a herald (3.3) who preaches good news (3.18). The spotlight is on John for a moment; it is a sketch that ends with his imprisonment. In Luke 7, we have a sound-bite of John in prison; after that He may be talked about in the book but he ceases to be an actor in the story line. This is *the* text on John.

The text unfolds in three ways: background of his preaching (3.1-2) content of his preaching (3.3-17), and summary of his preaching (3.18-20). We will cover the background of his preaching now in our introduction and the summary later in our conclusion.

Thus, concerning matters of background, we need to connect 3.1-2 with the last word we have of John in 1.80, which places him in the wilderness awaiting the day of his public ministry: **And the child [John] grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.** At his birth, Zechariah identified him as the prophet who will go before the Lord and prepare His ways by giving knowledge of salvation: **you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people** (1.76-77).

Luke 3.1-2 is strikingly detailed: **In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.** Clearly, the events Luke narrates have their place "in the midst of the Roman Empire in the full light of day"; these events were not done in a corner (Acts 26.26), but "within the framework of world history" (Stonehouse, *Luke* 59). Luke locks in the events historically: Palestine is divided between descendants of Herod the Great, Pilate governs Judea, one of Herod's sons rules Galilee, and Tiberius Caesar is the ruler of Rome. On the religious scene, the time frame covers the priesthoods of Annas and Caiaphas.

There is a certain generalization in these details, but the people named were well-known in Palestine and across the known world. Moreover, both Scripture and extra-biblical accounts reveal the corruption of these people and their opposition to the things of God. Accordingly, there is more than one reason for the mention of rulers and priests in geographical circles that narrow down from Rome to Israel. Within this passage, there is a subtle contrast between the world including institutional religion in Israel in opposition to God and the coming redemption of the world (as promised in the OT and by angels and prophets in Lk 1-2).

Therefore, John anticipates the redemption of the world, but he does so as a prophet in the wilderness preparing a people for entry into the coming new world. Our title is therefore: "John's Preaching in Preparation for the Coming One." So, what then is the content of his preaching? Luke tells us in verse 3: **And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.** At its core, his preaching involves three tightly related things: 1) he preaches baptism, 2) he preaches a baptism of repentance, and 3) he preaches a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Verse 3 is like a heading that is subdivided and amplified in verses 4-17.

1A. First, on the matter of content, John preaches baptism

The way the subject of baptism surfaces here in the ministry of the forerunner or way-preparer should interest us. Abruptly, we read of John **proclaiming a baptism**. There is no mention of a connection with OT baptisms and washing rites. They are there, for example, in the laws of a leprous person for his cleansing (Lev 14), in the requirement of washings due to various forms of ceremonial uncleanness (Lev 15), and in figurative applications of washing as we have in Isaiah 1.16: **Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes.** Moreover, there are literal cleansing rites by the sprinkling of water of purification (Num 8.7) similar to John's baptism as a purification (Jn 3.23-26). Isaiah's prophecy of the sprinkling of the nations (52.15) seems figurative, but it is the context to which the Eunuch appeals for Christian baptism in Acts 8. There are connections to OT and NT baptisms, but Luke does not mention any of them. He simply tells us that John proclaimed a baptism. So, even though baptism is an *external* washing rite, it has a fundamental importance in the preaching of the gospel by John.

Interestingly, Luke *highlights this importance* by telling us that John fulfills the role of a forerunner promised in the OT. He says: ⁴ **As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God"** (3.4-6). Notice that the main things about the forerunner are what he does (he preaches; the voice of one crying) and where he does it (in the wilderness). The wilderness where John grew into manhood is the rough terrain over which the coming king will travel. So, according to Isaiah, John is a herald that goes ahead of his king to insure that the roadway is straight, flat, and level for efficient travel. From this Isaiah passage, we get two more details: 1) the preaching prepares people (not literal roads) for salvation (1.16-17, **he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God...to make ready for the Lord a people prepared**), and 2) this preaching somehow extends beyond the Jews to include **all flesh** in salvation (3.6; earlier in Luke the focus is on Israel, 1.77).

How does baptism fulfill the promise of Isaiah or contribute to its fulfillment in the voice and preaching of John? To begin with, baptism marks the need of cleansing due to impurities. The need is similar to what Isaiah identifies with the image of a crooked, pot-holed, and rugged road. By preaching baptism, John fulfills the task of this promised herald who prepares a people in the wilderness (note that the wilderness theme is quite pronounced).

2A. Second, on content, John preaches a baptism *of repentance*

Baptism of repentance is fleshed out by the illustration of a fruit tree: **Bear fruits in keeping with repentance** (3.8). The tree in mind is not an apple or orange tree, it is a repentance tree. John makes clear what it means to come to his baptism. It means that you acknowledge your need of cleansing. You say things to yourselves in your heart, you say things to others, and you act in a certain way. John makes a strong point that you cannot be a repentance tree in name only. Any claim to being an apple tree is only as good as the apples it bears; so it is with being a repentance tree; it is only as good as the fruits of repentance it bears. If we want to know what fruits of repentance look like, we have a ready answer:⁷ **He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"** ⁸ **Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.** ⁹ **Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire"** (3.7-9).

These verses contain a mixture of things. There is a warning about being snake-like, subtle, and deceiving in the use of the outward rite of baptism. He pointedly appeals to the conscience by questioning the authority that drives his listeners to flee from the wrath to come. He also gets inside their thoughts when he tells them what they are not to say to themselves: **do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'** (3.8a; say to yourselves means to think in your hearts, to stake a claim to some distinction). Clearly, they are not to depend on their membership in the family of Abraham for cleansing and deliverance from God's judgment. To ground this claim, he cites the ability of God to raise up children for Abraham: **For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham** (3.8b). Surely, these words tell us that God does not depend on the children of Abraham in forming the new covenant people prepared for the Lord. The baptism of repentance is a point of turning away from the old Israel that stands under God's wrath to enter the new Israel, a people prepared in the wilderness for entry into the salvation of God.

Thus, the fruits of repentance include coming to terms with one's sinfulness, dependence on God's word and power, and one more ingredient: practical conduct that fits with mourning one's sinfulness and heartfelt dependence on God. This practical word comes to expression in relation to three groups of people coming to baptism. There is accent on the practical.

1) To the crowds

When John got to the point of judgment in the illustration of the axe laid to the root of the trees, he prompted a question from the crowds. His answer defined the practical nature of true repentance: ¹⁰ **And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?"** ¹¹ **And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise"** (3.10-11). He is very down to earth. You are to share of your possessions with those in need.

2) To the tax collectors

He continues the practical theme: be honest in all your dealings: ¹² **Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?"** ¹³ **And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do"** (3.12-13).

3) To the soldiers

Practical fruit-bearing is the emphasis for soldiers as well. Instead of using their position to squeeze money from the little people (people under their authority), they bear fruit worthy of repentance by practicing contentment: ¹⁴ **Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages** (3.14).

How then will God form this new Israel of all nations? He will do so through gospel proclamation that includes a call to a repentant life in very practical terms. The new household of faith is a household of repentance; a people of repentance.

3A. Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins

This comes out in a number of places here. Repentance-baptism promises forgiveness of sins. This is forgiveness against the day of wrath, (3.7). It is forgiveness before the prospect of total destruction for if you cut away the root of a tree, the entire tree is destroyed. In the judgment, at risk is the whole person, body and soul.

Repentance-baptism is also for protection from the fiery wrath of the Messiah's baptism, as we learn from 3.15-17: ¹⁵ **As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ,** ¹⁶ **John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.** ¹⁷ **His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."** To the inquiries of the people, who thought he might be the Christ, John was definitive in his reply. On one hand, he exclaims that Christ is "greater than I" in no uncertain terms by adding that he is not worthy to stoop down and untie the sandals on Christ's feet. On the other hand, Christ will baptize with a greater baptism, not with water but with the Holy Spirit. John has the prophet's perspective, so, he sees the baptizing work of the Christ, the Messiah in a twofold way: Christ will baptize with the Spirit and with fire. His message had a deeply serious side to it. He will burn the chaff as He gathers the wheat into His barn. The extremely heavy truth is that the fire will be unquenchable. This is a soft word that carries a big stick. The fire of judgment has no end; nothing will take the edge off of it; the punishment it meets out will never be diminished, extinguished, or overcome.

When John preached baptism, he preached repentance for the forgiveness of sins against the imminent day of final judgment soon to arrive at the hand of the coming one. Thus, with prophetic perspective, he preached in preparation of a people for the coming one. For John, history is rushing toward an imminent crisis of divine judgment. This raises eyebrows and some questions to try to address in conclusion.

Conclusion

This account ends with a brief summary of John's ministry. He preached good news and was locked up in prison: ¹⁸ **So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.** ¹⁹ **But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reprovved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done,** ²⁰ **added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison (3.18-20).** We know from other passages that John never left prison, except to go to his death at the hand of Herod. For preaching the good news of Christ, John experienced some bad news from Herod. A preacher may be bound but the word of God is not bound. So consider some final comments about the gospel-good-news.

1) The gospel is a promise to genuine repentance

The fruits-deeds of repentance-baptism are samples that show the practical nature of true repentance. The deeds do not merit eternal life. They are good deeds in a down to earth way, but they are deeds performed by sinners. The deeds are fruits of repentance; they flow from hearts that mourn their sins, turn away from them, turn to the Lord for forgiveness, and turn toward godly fruitfulness. The examples selected from the crowds, the tax collectors, and the soldiers highlight the radically practical character of the way of life in the new Israel of God. John paves the way for the preaching of Jesus and His message, namely, that calls for a decision: "You cannot love God and earthly things; you must make the choice of love for God above all earthly things." Repentance is a way of life as well as an entry way to life. It means to turn away from attachment to earthly things to God as your king. Therefore, it involves serving God in all earthly things. Repentance is not other-worldly being so heavenly minded that you are of no earthly

good. No, it means that you turn away from sin in how you obtain your money and possessions, and you turn away from sin in how you make use of your money and possessions.

2) The gospel is a promise of full salvation

John ends his life in prison, but the good news promises full salvation of the whole person, body and soul in deliverance from unquenchable fire. The burning punishment from the hand of Christ will never touch a hair on the head of those who walk in the way of repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is a marvelous promise and truly gospel-good-news. Repent: acknowledge your need of cleansing in baptism for the forgiveness of sins. This is the promise of full salvation for now and forever. May Jesus Christ be praised!