

**Text:** Luke 3:1-20

**Title:** The Prophet John the Baptist

**Truth:** All people must repent because the Lord is coming back.

**Date/Location:** September 24, 2023 at FBC

## Introduction

Luke jumps ahead in the narration to the next theologically important event in the lives of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. From approximately 8 A.D. to 26. Roughly 17 or 18 years have passed. John and Jesus are fully grown and fully ready for the ministry God has called them to do.

### I. The Time

- A. The 15<sup>th</sup> year of Tiberius Caesar. Despite how precise this sounds, there are a couple of complications to fixing a calendar date to this time. Tiberius followed the rule of Augustus Caesar, who died likely of natural causes at 75 years of age on August 19, 14 A.D. However, Tiberius had become co-regent in AD 11. Depending on which date is used as the baseline, the year Luke writes about here is either 26 or 29 A.D. The latter seems a bit too late. If the birth of Jesus was around 4 B.C., near the end of Herod the Great's life, then 26 A.D. would be about right because in 3:23 Jesus was about 30 years old.
- B. Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. His full name was Marcus Pontius Pilatus was governor 26-36 A.D. This puts him squarely in the period Luke is talking about and means that Jesus could not have died before 26 or after 36.
- C. Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, starting in 4 B.C. until 39 A.D., a very long reign. He received his right to rule from Augustus Caesar.
- D. Philip was tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis from 4 B.C. until 34 A.D.
- E. Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene. There is debate about this fellow, because he seems to share a name with a fellow who ruled 40-36 B.C., much earlier than the period Luke is writing about.

- F. Annas (~ 22 B.C. to 40 A.D.) and Caiaphas were high priests. Annas was officially high priest from 6-15 A.D. and had heavy influence over son-in-law Joseph son-of-Caiaphas who was high priest from 18-36 A.D.
- G. This information is specific, but Pilate, Herod, and Philip could fit either the earlier or later Tiberius date and do not help narrow it down. All of Luke's readers would have known about what time these events happened, and many would have been familiar with the names of some or all these men.

## II. John the Prophet

- A. We call John *the Baptist*, but he was first known as a prophet (Matt. 21:26, Mark 11:32, Luke 7:28, 20:6). In fact, the law and prophets were until John (Matt. 11:13, Luke 16:16). John was in a true sense the last of the Old Testament prophets. If you examine his message and compare it to Jeremiah or Ezekiel or Isaiah, for example, you will see that he calls the nation to turn around just like those men did centuries earlier. His ministry was unique, of course, in that he was a forerunner to the Messiah's first coming. None of the previous prophets functioned that way, although they did prophesy His coming!
- B. Like the prophet bards of old, "the word of God came to John." The same language was used of Shemaiah in 1 Kings 12:22 and Nathan in 1 Chronicles 17:3. The similar phrase "the word of the Lord came" occurs 104 times throughout the Old Testament from Genesis to Zechariah. Truly the original Jewish faith and the Christian faith were revealed from heaven to humanity. Those words were conveyed to the prophets, and then *through* the prophets to the people.
- C. John was residing in the wilderness at the time, evidently waiting for the word of God to come to Him. During this time, he was undoubtedly being forged into the man of God that he was. Often God takes His special servants through times of solitude to ready them for the ministry to which He has called them. Jesus took time alone. Moses spent a long time in the wilderness tending his father-in-law's sheep.

- D. John had the added element of proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. There are three concepts we must get hold of here: baptism, repentance, and remission of sins.
- E. To help us understand the idea that packages up these concepts, look at rest of the section through verse 6. There, Luke quotes Isaiah 40:3-5. With only slight variation, Luke quotes Isaiah's prophetic message to indicate that John the Baptist was doing just what Isaiah said would happen. That message:
1. Came from one crying out in the wilderness. His message was not popular; it was not sourced in the accepted authority structures of society. Today, it would be like saying that a message came from a redneck or backwoods area of the United States. It did not come from the ivory tower or the much-vaunted scientific community.
  2. The preacher proclaimed that people needed to prepare the way of the Lord. Luke, summarized what John was saying using Isaiah's metaphor of the preparations that were made for the arrival of royalty. The pathway was checked over, repaired, reinforced, inspected, protected, etc. Difficult portions of the path were avoided. Low spots were filled, high spots leveled off, crooked was made straight, washboard bumps smoothed out.
  3. When the king comes, He will not just be a king after the fashion of the world—with a political agenda. He will be in fact "the salvation of God." All flesh will see that salvation, and that salvation is in fact a person—the LORD.
  4. "Salvation" points our eyes beyond the metaphor of roads and potholes. It tells us that Isaiah and John are speaking about spiritual matters. They are speaking about sin under the figures of crooked roads, low spots, and difficult terrain. Instead, paths that are straight, valleys that are level, and roads that are smooth are poetic references to a life that is fixed—spiritually speaking. It is not the rough patch that it once was, but one that is calm and full of peace.
- F. You may pause and ask yourself if Isaiah really was pointing to John, and not to a future forerunner. The matter is complicated by

the fact that Jesus came once and is coming a second time. The first time was unsuccessful in the sense that the people rejected Him as king. John was working on preparing the way, but the way was not in the end prepared. The hearts of the people were not soft to the message. Thus, the need to restart and make attempt #2, which will be successful in the future.

- G. Back to the meaning of the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. I think the tendency is to read that quickly and assume that you must get baptized and then you will get the remission of sin. In other words, if I receive the religious ritual of baptism, then my sins will be forgiven.

But that is not at all the Biblical teaching. For one thing, it leaves out repentance. For another, people tend to focus on things external, on *doing something* to achieve status with God. We overlook the matter of the heart—in ourselves and as we observe others. We might think their behavior is disgusting but forget the heart of the person—created in God’s image, yet in utter darkness.

John told the people that they needed to change their minds about their sin. They need to turn from loving it to hating it. From loving idols to hating idols and instead to loving God. From greed and pride to contentment and humility. From selfish ambition to serving others. In a word, he taught them *repentance*.

When a person embraced that message and turned to God, the way was smoothed, and the path straightened in his life so that he was ready for the coming of the Lord. God promises forgiveness for those that truly turn from their wicked ways. Today, such a turning is accompanied by the acknowledgement of Jesus Christ as Lord, the one who died in our place for our sins and rose again from the dead.

The person who turned away from his former ways would then readily accept the water baptism that John offered—which was a concrete way to express that he had been blessed with repentance and remission of sin. The baptism symbolized the person’s attachment to the truth of repentance for forgiveness (remission).

### III. John's Message

- A. Were we to preach like John the Baptist today, we might say this: it appears that the lives of our fellow citizens are spiritually as bad or worse than condition of our Michigan roads. Just look around and you can see it. Nationwide, nearly 700,000 marriages ended in divorce in 2021. 930,000 children's lives were ended by abortion in 2020 according to the Guttmacher Institute—and 57% of Michigan voters supported Proposition 3 and its so-called “reproductive” rights. 48,000 people die annually by guns. Nearly 100,000 people died in 2021 from preventable drug overdoses. Over 40% of married people admit to having an affair. Promiscuity is accepted without question today. Media is full of filth. Vice is applauded. Moral confusion reigns. Right is called wrong and wrong is called right. And we have not even mentioned people's relationship to God, which is often to ignore Him, and sometimes to outright reject Him, or be angry at Him.
- B. In other words, our people require a lot of spiritual “construction.” The pothole-riddled road surface of their lives must be torn down to the base. Then, the road must be rebuilt fresh and smooth. Dropping the metaphor, our people must repent and receive the blessing of the remission of sins (Acts 3:26). The nation must turn to God in faith and trust Jesus for salvation. Each one must prepare himself for herself for the second coming of the Lord Jesus. Make His paths straight, smooth the rough places, fill the valleys, lower the mountains.
- C. John used picturesque language to confront the people. “Brood of vipers!” Not only did he call them to stop doing those bad things they were doing, but he also told them to bear fruit worthy of repentance. True repentance—the change of mind—is not in itself the same thing as doing good, or doing the opposite of the wrong you were doing before. But true repentance will, by and by, generate true change. If you continue to live like you used to live, then no one would say you have “repented.” Maybe you said something, but it was not true in your heart.
- D. John also taught the people that your ethnic heritage is of no use in this matter. You might trust you are a Jew, one of *God's people*,

and so you are “fine.” You are not fine. You have no “privilege” in this matter.

- E. John also taught that judgment is impending. The matter is urgent because the axe blade is touching the base of the tree, ready to be swung by the one wielding it. If there is no fruit of repentance, then the tree will be chopped down and cast into the fire. I doubt if we need to explain that metaphor.
- F. The audience asked what to do about this. John answered to share resources, not to embezzle funds, do not take advantage of your post to harm others, be content with what you receive as wages.

#### **IV. The Response to John, v. 15-20**

- A. The general populace was not so lost as to have forgotten that God promised the Messiah to come. Perhaps, they thought, John was that one. But John denied it, saying One far mightier than He was soon to come. His coming made John’s repentance message even more urgent because Messiah would baptize with the Spirit and fire. The fire baptism is a reference to judgment, where the wheat is brought in, but the chaff is burned up.
- B. John continued to preach to the people. He exhorted them. Pause for a second: exhortation is good for the soul. But people naturally recoil from being admonished. Defense mechanisms go up, anger rises. Resolve in your heart that will not be the case.
- C. Herod did not like John’s exhortations because he was a very immoral fellow with no respect for God. So, he put John in prison. John was a religious prisoner. Luke’s analysis, God-breathed as it is, remarks that Herod added that evil above all the other ones he had done. Persecuting God’s prophet is akin to messing with God himself. Not a good idea.

#### **Conclusion**

For John, the first coming of the Messiah was a critical impetus for people to repent. The second coming is no less of a motivation for us today to prepare the way for Him by turning from sin to Christ and receiving forgiveness.

MAP