

John Prepares the Way

Lesson for December 18, 2022

Unit I: God Prepares the Way

Scriptural Background: Luke 3:1-20; John 1

Printed Text: Luke 3:2- 6, 15-18

Key verse: *He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.* (Luke 3:3, NIV)

Word Study

In 1824 General Marquis de LaFayette came to visit. He was met at the harbor and was given a tour of the town in a carriage pulled by six white horses. Now this particular house sits at the corner of five converging streets. It was a rainy day and the mud alone made it hard for the horses to navigate. They could not make the turn and so legend has it that someone took an ax and started chopping away at the corner of this house, making it possible for the General to pass. And to this day this is known as *The Lafayette House*.

Now all logic would argue the veracity of this story. And yet, true or not, it brings to mind the urgent exhortation of John today, doesn't it?

- To clear away that which stands in the way of royalty getting through?
- To make a way for Christ to come now and to come again in all fullness?
- To just do what needs to be done, whatever that might mean, even if it means chopping away at what before seemed essential to all that we are in order to make a way for the new, the even more important, the presence and power of life itself?

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Key Terms

1. **Repentance** (verse 3) - To turn from sin and dedicate oneself to the amendment of one's life; to feel regret or contrition; to change one's mind; the way provided for us to become free from our sins and receive forgiveness for them.
2. **Winnowing fork** (verse 17) - A hand device used by the farmer to throw the mix from his shredded pile of grain and straw into the air to let the wind carry the straw and chaff away and the grain fall back for collection. "Fan" (KJV)

Lesson Background

John the Baptist was born under miraculous circumstances (Luke 1:13). There was no question that his role would be to herald the arrival of the Messiah (Luke 1:16–17). To prepare for that mission, John seems to have spent most of his life living remotely, in the desert (Luke 1:80). While the rest of the world went about business as usual, and men were put in positions of power (Luke 3:1–2), God's message was given to this obscure person living in an obscure place, eating odd food, and wearing odd clothes (Matthew 3:4).

John was very careful to clarify that he was not the Promised One (John 1:20). Luke will explain how John the Baptist was a prophesied herald, mentioned in Old Testament books such as Isaiah (Luke 3:4–6). The core of John's preaching message was repentance. His role was to prepare the people of Israel for Christ, by reminding them of their sin and the need to turn from it. Those who responded to his call for repentance declared it publicly through baptism. When the time came, John would point people to Jesus and then John's ministry would begin to subside (John 1:26–34; 3:28–30).

The lesson begins in the “Fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar”. Because of the way Tiberius came to power, this date is hard to fix precisely. Tiberius Caesar was the second Roman emperor. The other individuals mentioned in Luke 3:1 include Pilate and Herod. Pontius Pilate was the fifth governor of Judea and was subordinate to Caesar. Herod Antipas is the main Herod in the gospel accounts. He was the one who had John the Baptist put to death (14:1-12) and examined Christ on the eve of the crucifixion (Luke 23:1-12). With all this, Luke reminds both his original readers and us today of the corruption and moral degradation of the Roman Empire, especially in the distant provinces like Judea.

Lesson In Depth

I. He Preached the Word (Luke 3:2-6)

Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests: According to Josephus, Annas served as High-Priest A.D. 6-15, when he was deposed by Roman officials. He nonetheless retained de facto power, as seen in the fact that his successors included 5 of his sons and Caiaphas, a son-in-law. Caiaphas was the actual High-Priest during the time Luke describes, but Annas still controlled the office. This is seen clearly in the fact that Christ was taken to Annas first after His arrest, then to Caiaphas.

Luke 3:1-2 is just setting the time that the things that happen in Chapter 3 occur. Tiberius Caesar was the second Roman emperor. Pontius Pilate was the governor of Judaea and was subordinate to Caesar. Herod was subordinate to Pontius Pilate and was over the small area of Galilee where John the Baptist and Jesus lived.

Annas and Caiaphas were the head of the temple worship. The mention of these two corrupt high priests reminds us that the Jewish leaders were more interested in power politics than in serving God.

The word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness: This “John”, mentioned here, was John the Baptist. John lived in the desert since his youth (Luke 1:80). But now, prompted by the word of God, John began to fulfill his ultimate calling: to be a forerunner of the Messiah. This Word of God that John received was from God, not man. The message John got was a message of the Spirit.

Of course, it will affect these rulers indirectly, but the message is not for them as rulers. The message John gets speaks to the soul of man.

Baptism of repentance: The symbolism of John's baptism likely had its roots in Old Testament rituals (Leviticus 15:13). Baptism had also long been administered to Gentile proselytes coming into Judaism. The baptism of John thus powerfully and dramatically symbolized repentance.

There was nothing strange in the ceremony of baptism (a ceremonial immersion) itself. The strange thing was that *Jews* submitted to baptism. This was a common ritual for Gentiles who wanted to become Jews. For a Jew to submit to baptism was to say something like, "I'm as bad as a heathen Gentile." This was a true mark of humble repentance, a radical rededication to the Lord. This baptism of repentance John presented identified a person with their need to get right with God and be cleansed. The people were repenting in anticipation of the Messiah's arrival.

John had one message, "repent". That should be the message of our day also. To repent is the first step on the way to being saved. Then when we repent, we must change our mind and become a new creature in Christ. Our thoughts must be different. We must walk a different walk than before. Our desires must change.

What John the Baptist was saying is turn from your wicked ways and live a holy life pleasing unto God.

John had been chosen even before his birth for this job. He had lived a near perfect life and was well respected by those around him. This message that John had received from God was very similar to the great commission which says, "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." (Mark 16:15).

As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying,: Luke connected John the Baptist with the one prophesied by Isaiah (Isaiah 40:3-5). John himself was aware of this from his early days, because his father was aware of it from before John's birth (Luke 1:76-77).

The voice of one crying in the wilderness: It appears that John the Baptist was not speaking in the temple. He was out in a desert area where few lived. John was preparing the people to be ready for the Savior. He was proclaiming the coming of the Lord.

Prepare the way of the LORD: John's great message was that things *can* be set right. The Messiah is here to do things that are too big for man - filling valleys, leveling mountains, setting crooked roads straight and rough roads smooth. This is speaking of obstacles of every kind which shall be done away with so that everyone will be able to hear.

The Jews at that time thought that the problem was mainly "*them*" – that is, the Romans who politically oppressed them. John made them see that when you got right down to it, the problem was really with *me*, not *them*. *I* have to get right with God.

And all flesh shall see the salvation of God: All flesh -, Gentiles as well as Jews. All four gospels quote (Isaiah 40:3; i.e. Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; John 1:23). Only Luke adds (verses 5-6), thus using a familiar text from Isaiah to stress his theme of the universal scope of the gospel.

Salvation is not just for one particular group; salvation is for everyone who will accept it. Salvation is an offer of God to all mankind, a way out. The way of the Messiah must be made ready. He came to *all mankind*. (NIV)

II. He Reached the World (Luke 3:15-18)

In the verses prior to this outline (Luke 3:7- 14), John preached that repentance will help you escape ruin. Some people were coming out to John to be baptized by John, but they had not repented of anything. They were coming because this was the religious experience of the day. It was the thing to do is you wanted to appear holy. But John says to them, “You religious rulers haven’t repented. You just want to appear holy. You just want everybody to think you’re righteous. And so here you are to get baptized. This is the height of religious hypocrisy.”

John calls them a brood of vipers or a nest of vipers, to identify them with the greatest religious hypocrite of the day—Annas the High Priest. He was supposed to be the greatest religious ruler, but he used his power and authority to whisper, and hiss like a viper in the ears of politicians and judges in order to influence their decisions his way. So, these people are like him. They want to appear holy, but they haven’t actually admitted to any fault or sin.

True repentance requires fruit—actual changes in attitude and actions. True repentance requires a genuine relationship with God. John continued by saying a failure to repent brings judgment and then admonishes them to share and be generous, that they be fair with each other, and that they not be mean and cruel; that they be happy with what they get.

The lesson resumes with John pointing forward to a greater One and a greater baptism.

And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he was the Christ, or not: It appears that many believed that John the Baptist was the “looked for” Messiah. They had expected Messiah for so long, and John seemed right for what they were looking for. Certainly, he was like no other man that they had ever come into contact with.

They also know of his miracle birth to aged parents. The other gospels do not mention that many thought John to be Messiah. He was so different it is not surprising that many thought this man to be Messiah.

John answered, saying unto them all, I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh: John knew that he was not Messiah and was quick to tell others that he was not. He was a voice proclaiming the coming of the Savior. John pointed the crowds to Jesus. Everybody wants to play first fiddle, to be in control, to be noticed. But right in the middle of having great ‘success’ as a preaching prophet, at the peak of his ministry, John the Baptist stepped back and said, “Somebody else is coming who is greater than I am, Pay attention to him, not me. He must increase. I must decrease. From now on, I’m going to be second fiddle. It’s not about you and me. It’s all about Jesus.

Whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose: The rabbis of Jesus' day taught that a teacher might require just about anything of his followers *except* to have them take off his sandals. That was considered too humiliating to demand. Yet John said that he was not even worthy to do *this* for Jesus.

John had many reasons to be proud, yet he was humble. He had a miraculous birth, a prophesied destiny, a man called to personally fulfill great prophetic promises, a powerful preacher, and a man with a great following.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire: John said that the Messiah was coming with a different baptism. The Messiah would also bring a baptism of fire, fire that would both *purify* and *destroy* what is lacking, like fire burns up the worthless chaff. God's power is always a transforming power, a purifying power.

The Holy Spirit's outpouring was promised as part of the New Covenant. We are promised an *immersion*, an *overflowing* of the Holy Spirit in our lives. This was often experienced as people were prayed for with hands laid on them (Acts 6:6, 8:17, 9:17, 13:3-4, and 19:6).

Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor: "Fan" is a winnowing fork, a tool for tossing grain into the wind so that the chaff is blown away. The Messiah will also be the one to divide the true from the false, to separate the wheat from the chaff.

will gather the wheat into his garner; but the chaff he will burn with fire unquenchable: "He will burn up the chaff" just meant the wicked shall burn eternally. This is a prophetic statement by John speaking of the separation Jesus will make of His own from the evil on Judgment Day. Christians are the wheat. The Lord will gather us unto Him, but the chaff (unbeliever), has nothing but the Lake of Fire to look forward to. This fan in His hand just means that He can get this all stirred up and going all by Himself.

When you fan a fire, it burns hotter. His floor will be clean, regardless of what must be done to cleanse it. Jesus taught the separation of good from evil here on the earth and also taught in the parable of the wheat and the chaff the different fates of the two. Notice (in verse 17), that it is Jesus who is the Judge.

And many other things in his exhortation preached he unto the people: John the Baptist didn't follow in his father's footsteps as a priest in the temple. He was a prophet. He cared for the spiritual health of his nation with all of his heart. He saw clearly what needed to be done and he spoke out what people needed to hear, boldly, without any sugar coating. He challenged people to break out of normality and live radically new lives.

Lesson Summary

Luke 3:1-6 taught that truly being set free from sin requires repentance—a 180 degree turn away from sin, and a turn toward God. True repentance, as John came preaching it, requires both a turn from sin, and a turn to God. Only in this way will the chains of sin be broken. Only in this way will judgment be escaped. Only in this way can we get off the path to wrath.

John gave three reasons why people needed to look at Jesus rather than himself.

First, he said that Jesus was more powerful than himself. Jesus had the power to turn really messed up people around. He had the power to heal the most wounded hearts. He had the power to set the hearts of his disciples on fire so that they turned the world upside down. If we want that power, we need to look at Jesus.

Second, John said that Christ is far more worthy than he was. We, as those who heard John the Baptist, so easily get caught up with trying to impress the world with what good people we are. Compared to Christ, our hearts are so unworthy. He sacrificed the comforts of home and family to serve the most broken people of his world, day after day. He risked the anger of the most powerful people in His world so that the truth of God could be heard. He went all the way to death on the cross, a horrible torture to take the punishment for our sins upon himself. Can any of us dare to compare ourselves to that?

The third comparison that John made between himself, and Jesus was that John baptized people with water while Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit. Jesus can touch our hearts deeper than any human can. He is the one with the real power. He is the one whose example is truly worthy. He is the one whose Spirit can bring life to all that we do.

When we consider how “John Prepares the Way” John the Baptist serves as a model for vital ministry - focus on Jesus above all else.