

The Ministry of John the Baptist & The Baptism of Repentance

Luke 3:1-14

Luke 3:1-14: Now 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, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. 3 And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, 4 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. 5 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.'" 7 Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. 9 And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." 10 So the people asked him, saying, "What shall we do then?" 11 He answered and said to them, "He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." 12 Then 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 what is appointed for you." 14 Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, "And what shall we do?" So he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages."

Background Notes

In the last section of chapter 2 we read about the one event in our Lord's boyhood life that is recorded in Scripture. At 12 years of age the Lord went up to Jerusalem with Mary and Joseph for the feast of the Passover, and there He confounded and amazed the teachers of the Law with His insights and answers concerning the Word of God. In the last verse of chapter 2, we read, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men."

About 18 years went by between the last verse of chapter 2 and the first verse of chapter 3, where we read, "*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.*" As a very accurate historian, Dr. Luke precisely pinpointed the time when John the Baptist made his public appearance! Tiberius was the Caesar, Pilate was the governor, Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great, was the ruler in Galilee, Philip, another son of Herod the Great, was the ruler over the region northeast of the Sea of Galilee called Iturea, and Lysanias was the ruler of Abilene, in the far north of Israel, northwest of Damascus.

Verse 2 says that the Word of God came to John during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. The Romans had deposed Annas as high priest. Eventually Caiaphas, his son-in-law, took over, but the Jews still recognized Annas as high priest. Annas and Caiaphas were both corrupt, as we know from the biblical record of our Lord's trial.

Until his public appearance, John the Baptist lived in the Judean wilderness. Luke 1:80 - *"So the child [John the Baptist] grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel."* In chapter 3, John the Baptist made his public appearance. As the forerunner of the Messiah, John the Baptist was a powerful preacher, and he called on the people to repent, and prepare for the coming of the Lord.

Doctrinal Points

1. The preaching of John the Baptist included a baptism of repentance.

In verses 4 through 6, Luke quoted Isaiah's Messianic prophecy from Isaiah 40, a prophecy that will not be completely fulfilled until the Lord returns. In those days, when a very important person, like a king, was coming for a visit the people would fix the roadway - fill the ravines, lower the hills, straighten out the crooked road, and smooth out the rough roads. They would literally level and straighten the roadway by shaving off the tops of the hills and filling in the hollows. John the Baptist applied this road repair process in a figurative way, to the need of spiritual and moral preparation for the coming of the Messiah. The people needed to repent of their sins, get their hearts right and set their lives in order before God, because the Messiah was about to arrive.

In order to show that they really meant business with God, those who repented underwent John's "baptism of repentance." This was not the same as "believer's baptism." Believer's baptism was not practiced until after our Lord's ascension and the Church was formed. John's baptism was one of repentance. When people underwent John's baptism, they were stating publicly that they were repenting of their sins and they were preparing for the coming of the Messiah. They also were identifying with the company of believers who were separating themselves from the hypocrisy of Judaism.

It's important to note that John's **baptism in itself did not forgive sins**. However, the individual's **repentance** resulted in the forgiveness of sins. This is true today, with regard to believer's baptism. Baptism does not save us, and is not necessary for salvation. Baptism is a public statement that one has repented of sin and turned by faith to Christ for salvation. The preaching of John the Baptist included a baptism of repentance.

2. The preaching of John the Baptist emphasized the fruits of repentance.

John's preaching in verses 7-14 sounds very much like the book of James, doesn't it? "Faith without works is dead."

Apparently, there were some Jews who were just pretenders. They attempted to be baptized by John but they had not really repented. They thought the fact that they were descendants of Abraham was good enough. John denounced these hypocrites and called them “a brood of vipers.” He told them that the ax was already laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. They and the unrepentant nation of Israel could expect the judgment of God, just as unfruitful trees are cut down and burned. If there is true repentance, there will be “fruits” of repentance, then and today. True repentance will show itself by a changed lifestyle. If there is no fruit, it proves that there is no root. Fruit does not lead to repentance but is the result of repentance.

Verses 10-14 John gave some examples of the fruits of repentance as he answered the various groups who were asking what they should do. Sharing with those in need is a fruit of repentance (v11). He told them, “*He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.*” Let me ask you: Are you aware of those in need around you? Are you willing to share your stuff with them? That’s a fruit of repentance.

In verses 12-13, John the Baptist told the tax collectors not to cheat, as most of them did. The tax collectors of that day (sometimes called “publicans”) would always collect more than they were supposed to and line their own pockets with the extra cash. Let me ask you: Do you cheat in your business, or on your income tax return, or on exams, if you’re a student? Not cheating is certainly a fruit of repentance.

The soldiers (v14) were either Roman soldiers or some of the limited Jewish “soldiers” whom the Roman government allowed for certain purposes, such as guarding the Temple. Soldiers were known for brutality and extortion and low wages. John told the soldiers who had been baptized to show fruits of repentance by not intimidating or extorting the ordinary people, and by not accusing falsely. He also said they should be content with their wages. Being content with your lot in life, including your wages, is an indication of a humble life that is right with God. It’s a fruit of repentance. The preaching of John the Baptist emphasized the fruits of repentance.

Practical Applications

1. Be a clear voice in the wilderness.

When John the Baptist quoted from Isaiah 40, he was willing to take the humble place of just being a voice in the wilderness, preparing the way for the Lord. He was not interested in being in the spotlight or in drawing attention to himself, but only in being a clear voice preparing for, and pointing to, the Lord Jesus.

What about us? Even in serving the Lord, it is possible to lose sight of the fact that we are just voices for the Lord in the barren wilderness of this world. Too many Christians start seeing themselves as more than just the humble voice in the wilderness. They want to make a name for themselves and become “important” and “successful” in the ministry! As a result, the Christian message is no longer clear. It becomes distorted and worldly. Let’s be more like John the Baptist. Be a clear voice in the wilderness!

2. Don't leave a stone unturned!

When something is lost and you diligently look for it, you might say, "I didn't leave a stone unturned" in looking for it. In Luke 3:8, John the Baptist said to the unbelieving Jews *"Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones."* What did John the Baptist mean when he said that *"God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones?"* He meant that just being a Jew, a physical descendant or physical child of Abraham, does not save you, and it does not make you a spiritual child of Abraham. To become a spiritual child of Abraham, true repentance from sin is required. A miraculous work of God must take place in your life. And God can do this miracle. He is able to take dead stones and raise up spiritual children to Abraham.

If you are a believer, you were once a dead stone - but now you are alive in Christ. You are a living stone (1 Peter 2:5). And you are now a spiritual child of Abraham. Galatians 3:7 says "Those who are of faith are sons of Abraham." As believers, we have the responsibility to share this good news with all the "dead stones" around us. Don't leave a stone unturned!