

Luke 3:1-6

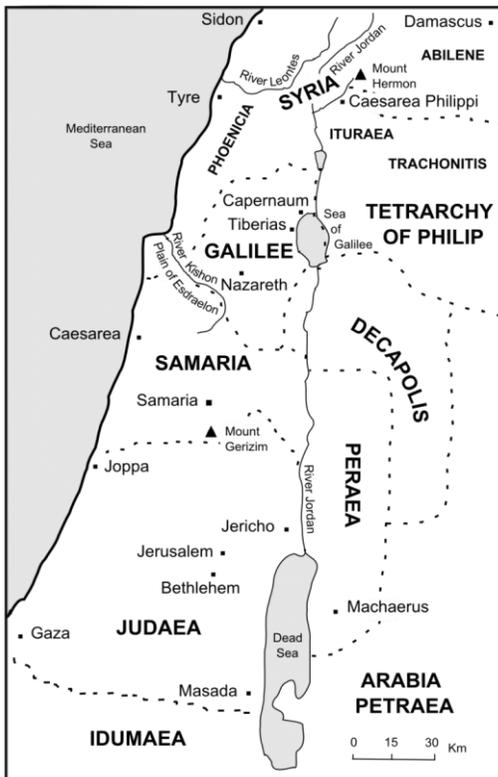
The Ministry of John the Baptist

As we begin, it has been eighteen years since we last encountered Jesus, and thirty years since we last saw John the Baptist. The nation of Israel is still waiting for the fulfillment of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. They possessed neither the land nor the kingdom of promise. They were mired in legalism. There had been whispers of a Messiah some time ago, but most who had seen Him were probably long since dead (certainly Simeon and Anna, probably Zacharias and Elizabeth, and perhaps even Joseph). Now the first prophet in nearly four centuries appears on the public scene with the task of exhorting the people to “make ready” for the Son of God.

The ministry of John the Baptist is mentioned by all four gospel writers, as well as by both Paul and Peter. Peter speaking to Gentiles in Acts 10:37 says, “You yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea, starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed.” And Paul in Antioch begins, “God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, after John had proclaimed before His coming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel,” (Acts 13:23-24). Also, when the issue of replacing Judas is discussed by the remaining disciples, it was determined that they would choose from among those who had been with them “beginning with the baptism of John” (Acts 1:22).

The Time

Despite the detail given by Luke, there is some question about exactly when this happened. Over time, two theories have emerged. The first has John and Jesus beginning their ministry about 28-29 AD. The other, more traditional, date is 26 AD. Augustus died on August 19, AD 14, therefore the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius should be 29 AD. However, if Jesus was “about thirty” (Luke 3:23) when He began His ministry, and He was born about 5-4 BC, can “about thirty” really be interpreted as 33-34 years of age? We will look at the other clues before we resolve this issue.



The other persons mentioned by Luke provide a framework for historicity. When Herod the Great died in 4 BC, his kingdom was divided by the Romans among three of his sons. One of these, Archelaus, was given the land of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea. However, he proved so troublesome that the Romans removed him from power and had his territory ruled by “mere” governors appointed by the emperor, and the entire territory from then on was referred to as Judea. The fifth of these governors was Pilate. “Pilate was governor of Judea” (v.1) from 26-36 AD. He is seen in both biblical and other contemporary sources as weak and lacking backbone. He had offended the Jews by having his soldiers carry banners with offensive images into Jerusalem. When the Jewish leaders protested he threatened to have them all killed, but when they

persisted, he backed down and removed the banners. We will see the same vacillating behavior at Jesus' trial.

One brother of Archelaus was "Herod was tetrarch of Galilee" (v.1). This refers to Herod Antipas who would later order the execution of John the Baptist (Luke 9:9). He ruled in from 4 BC-39 AD, but was later banished when he fell out of favor. "His brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis" (v.1). This third brother, Philip, ruled from 4 BC-34 AD and had enlarged and beautified the city of Caesarea Philippi. According to the 1st century Jewish historian Josephus, Philip was a good ruler who cared for his people.

The last of these rulers, "Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene" (v.1). All we have in the historical record regarding him are some inscriptions that demonstrate he was ruler at this time.

The last clue "in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas" (v.2) also presents a problem. Annas was high priest from 6-15 AD but had been removed by the fourth governor of Judea, Gratus. Still, he can be considered high priest later for three reasons. First, the title remained with the man, much in the same way as we still refer to past presidents as president. Second, according to Numbers 35:25, "The congregation shall deliver the manslayer from the hand of the blood avenger, and the congregation shall restore him to his city of refuge to which he fled; and he shall live in it until the death of the high priest who was anointed with the holy oil" it can be concluded that high priests were to serve for life. More practically speaking, though, is the fact that after Annas was removed, five of his sons, one grandson, and his son-in-law, Caiaphas, served as high priests. Thus, Annas had a powerful influence, even if not the direct power, as high priest.

Caiaphas served as high priest from 18-36 AD. He was very involved in the capture, trial, and execution of Christ. "3Then the chief priests and the elders of the people were gathered together in the court of the high priest, named Caiaphas; 4and they plotted together to seize Jesus by stealth and kill Him" (Matthew 26:3-4). Also, John 18:12-14, "12So the Roman cohort and the commander and the officers of the Jews, arrested Jesus and bound Him, 13and led Him to Annas first; for he was father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year. 14Now Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was expedient for one man to die on behalf of the people."

Since all of the other evidence offered by Luke fits for either date, the key is how we date the beginning of the reign of Tiberius. While Tiberius did become emperor upon the death of Augustus in 14 AD, he was named co-regent in 11 AD. It is possible, then, that Luke is using that date as the starting point. This argument lines up better with other facts at our disposal. Josephus informs us that Herod the Great began the construction of the temple in 19 BC. From John 2:20, "The Jews then said, 'It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?'" We know that the temple had been there for forty-six years when Jesus is celebrating Passover. That means Jesus began His ministry in about 26 AD. Since Jesus was "about thirty" when He began His public ministry, and the best argument for the date of His birth is 5-4 BC, the date of John the Baptist beginning his ministry in 26 AD works best.

But the larger point that ought not to be lost in this detail is this -- it was when a Roman emperor and hypocritical priests were in control that the Messiah came. We should never despair of the world around us.

The Place

The wilderness described here stretched from the Dead Sea to Judaea, and north to the Jordan River valley. We do not know how long John lived there; perhaps both Elizabeth and Zacharias had died when he was young, since they were older when he was born. Some have argued that John joined a community like that at Qumran. It is not impossible that a young man or priestly birth would be both inclined and welcomed by groups like the Essenes, but this has so far been neither proven nor disproven.

John, though, clearly was not a hermit, "he came into all the district around the Jordan" (v.3). He preached near the point where the Jordan River enters the Dead Sea. This place was a crossroads for travelers from Judaea to Perea and no doubt many heard his message. Multitudes came (Luke 3:7) as we will see, but we need to recognize that by Wilderness, we do not need to think isolation.

"The word of God" (v.2) came to him as it had done to prophets before him. Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Micah, Jonah, Zephaniah, and Haggai all describe a similar experience. John, like the Messiah he was about to proclaim, was moving from obscurity into the public light.

John preached where God called him. Not a large city, but the wilderness. We should be humble enough to do the same.

The Doctrine

John preached a fundamental truth of our faith -- one that centers on "repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (v.3). This was a message as much needed then as now. Captivity had broken the Jews of their idolatry, but it had been replaced by a strict legalism that lost all meaning of the Law. They were certain they could achieve the necessary righteousness through their own efforts.

Christ would preach against this in the Sermon on the Mount and called out the Pharisees on more than one occasion.

Matthew 5:27-28, "²⁷You have heard that it was said, 'you shall not commit adultery'; ²⁸but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Matthew 5:38-39, "³⁸You have heard that it was said, 'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth' ³⁹But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also."

Matthew 5:43-44, "⁴³You have heard that it was said, 'you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,"

Matthew 23:1-7, "¹Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, ²saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; ³therefore all that they tell you, do and

observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them. ⁴They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. ⁵But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments. ⁶They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, ⁷and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men."

Paul said much the same thing in Romans 2:28-29, "he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God." John was challenging the contemporary Jewish teaching that keeping the Law was sufficient to earn God's favor. This was works righteousness at its core. This placed an unbearable (because impossible) burden on the people. The Jewish people must have lived under a constant weight of failure and inadequacy. John's message was that there was forgiveness, but forgiveness only to those who repented, "repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (v.3).

This repentance, *metanoia*, can be understood in two similar ways. In Luke 15:7, "I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance," it implies a "practical reformation" and in Hebrews 12:17, "For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears." it describes a "reversal of the past." It is not merely sorrow either for sin or, more often, its consequences. It is not an intellectual rethinking of sin. It is a repudiation of sin and a turning away. It must be accompanied by bearing fruit, as we will see in Luke 3:8-9.

It must also be understood that this repentance is not a human emotion apart from the grace of God. It is not something we do to get saved. It is the work of the Holy Spirit Who "will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8). Also 2 Corinthians 7:9, "I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us" reminds us that this is ultimately, and solely, the work of God.

What is meant by a "baptism of repentance" (v.3)? This cannot be the Christian baptism symbolizing the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, for that had not yet happened. Jews, though they had many ceremonial washings, did not practice baptism. Gentile converts to Judaism, however, did undergo a ceremonial bath. The historical record does not state when this particular practice began, though it was sometime around when John and Jesus enter the scene. Whether it had just begun, and John was referencing it, or whether the practice begins with John is not certain. In any case, it is clear that John was stating that Jews who followed the Law were no better than Gentiles and needed to convert to this new faith in the same way as Gentiles when they converted to Judaism.

Two other points worth keeping in mind. First, no amount of repentance can make atonement for sin. This is, and must be, entirely the work of Christ. No matter how penitent we are, we cannot make up for our own sin. The debt is too great and our ability to pay too feeble even if we tried.

Second, let us not grow tired of hearing this message. Repentance must be preached until humanity ceases to sin. It may be old news to us, perhaps, but it is still all too relevant.

The Prophecy

The symbolism of Isaiah 40:3-5 is that of God coming to lead His people home from captivity. The Prophet is calling to the people to “clear the way” (Isaiah 40:3). John now applies this prophecy to the Messiah Who has come to grant a deeper and more profound deliverance. What was foreshadowed in the return from Babylonian captivity, is realized in the coming of the Messiah. John was to proclaim the coming of the Messiah so that people might “make ready the way” (v.4) for God’s grace to work in them.

That there must be preparation is due to our sin nature. The people must “make His paths straight” (v.4). The self-righteousness of the Pharisees and those who followed them was an obstacle to God’s will being fulfilled in their lives. The complacency of “we have Abraham for our Father” (Matthew 3:9) must be done away with if they are to be true children of God.

“Every ravine will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be brought low” (v.5) can refer to the false humility that some manifest along with the natural pride and arrogance of a sinful people. “The crooked will become straight” (v.5) can refer to the bad habits that will be broken when people genuinely repent.

Surely that “all flesh will see the salvation of God” (v.6) reflect the truth that people of every nation will experience the salvation of God as He calls them.

Take Aways

Do not be ashamed of being the opening act.

It must be understood though, that God saves. Even our preparation is an act of God’s grace.

What are you doing to help other “make ready” for the coming of the Son of God into their lives?