



THE GOSPEL OF
Luke

SESSION OBJECTIVE: LUKE 3:1-20

To understand the what the ministry of John the Baptizer emphasized.

Context Matters

As was discussed in the beginning of this study, Luke pays careful attention to the historical context of Jesus' life and ministry in a way that sets him apart from the other three Gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, John). He spent a presumably considerable amount of time compiling the firsthand accounts from several individuals before contributing his Gospel (Lk. 1:1-4). Here again, in chapter 3, the reader finds Luke's careful research tactics at play: "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, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas" (Lk. 3:1-2a). He carefully positions the beginning of John the Baptizer's ministry under a Roman emperor, a governor and three tetrarchs of Palestine, and two high priests in Jerusalem. As James Edwards wrote, "Matt, Mark, and John introduce Jesus in the context of provincial Jewish messianic expectations; Luke introduces the gospel in the context of world history."¹

Details like these matter. To modern, western eyes, names like the ones we find in the first two verses of chapter three are easy to glaze over because they mean nothing to us, but we are missing what the original audience would have considered crucial details. Luke's knack for historical accuracy becomes a tool of apologetics for modern Christians; these things really happened under real rulers and authorities.

¹ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 102.

John's Ministry Begins

Verses 2 and 3 begin John's ministry story: "The word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Below is a breakdown of some key details.

BAPTISM

The central message of John was baptism, specifically one that demonstrated repentance and brought forth forgiveness of sin. In the pre-Christian era, there were many types of ritual washings akin to baptism. However, there are notable differences as well that set John's apart. For one, the ritual washing of this day were self-administered, whereas John was the one administering baptism to the one being baptized. Secondly, it was an ongoing practice that one would undergo sometimes almost daily, whereas John's baptism seems to be a one time only event. Luke says that John went "proclaiming" this baptism, which stems from the Greek word we translate as "preaching" (κηρύσσω, kēryssō). However, it is more accurately understood as a "public announcement." John's message was not meant to be a private affair, but a public declaration.

Given that this baptism was proclaimed as a way of preparing for the coming of the Lord, it makes sense that John likely had the commands of Exodus 19 in mind that Peter later reiterates: "And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6; 1 Pet. 2:9). Just four verses later, in order to prepare for such a transformation, God tells Moses: "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments" (Ex. 19:10, emphasis added). The washing signifies something that has already taken place inwardly. In the same way, John's baptism is one that announces outwardly a reality that takes place inwardly, namely repentance.

ISAIAH

In order to drive home this notion of repentance even further, Luke includes some quotations of Isaiah that even Matthew leaves out. Verse 4 says, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" Matthew includes this verse only in his account (Matt. 3:3), but Luke carries on the quote from Isaiah 40:3-5, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 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, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" That Luke includes the extra verses emphasizes the message of repentance. The description of valleys being filled, mountains being made low, and crooked paths becoming straight envision an act of repentance, or turning away from one's ways and moving in the opposite direction. Repentance is the central key to rightly believing the Gospel. You cannot receive the good news of Jesus Christ without acknowledging the dreadfully bad news first.

SOME DIFFERENCES FROM ISAIAH

There are at least two notable differences in Luke's quotation of Isaiah that are intentional and meaningful. First, Isaiah's account says, "make straight in the desert a highway for our God," but Luke says, "a highway for Him," indicating that by this point they were already connecting references about God to Christ. Secondly, Isaiah 40:5 the phrase, "And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed," but Luke leaves this out. The reasoning is most likely that Christ has not returned yet, and thus His full glory has not been realized, and will not be until the final things.

REPENTANCE

Keeping in step with his message of repentance, John goes on to say in verses 8 and 9, “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. 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.” Repentance is not merely words, but observable change in a person’s life, decisions, and desires. The Bible calls this “bearing fruit.” In verses 10 through 14, John lays out practically what repentance might look like. The Jews of this time waged their eternity on the reality that they were children of Abraham, but John dashes their bad theology by indicating that God is going to judge based on fruit, and that which does not bear fruit will be thrown “into the fire” (Lk. 3:9).

Spirit and Fire

One key interpretative challenge is figuring out what is meant by Jesus baptizing, “with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Lk. 3:16). Some people have attempted to make the argument that these two concepts of Spirit and fire should be seen as the same thing. In Acts chapter 2, on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit first comes to the disciples it says, “and divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them” (Acts 2:3). Given that Luke wrote Acts, the argument is that they should be seen as one.

However, over and over the term “fire” is used to mean judgment in Luke’s Gospel. Even more, the very next verse sets up two juxtaposing groups of people: “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” (Lk. 3:17). In other words, John is saying that Jesus will come to baptize, in a sense, all people, some with the Holy Spirit upon their repentance and submission to Him, and some with fire in judgment for rejecting Him. Thus, the Spirit and fire are two separate kinds of baptisms meant for two separate groups of people.

Imprisoned

The final portions of this passage detail how John ended up being imprisoned by Herod the Tetrarch: “But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by John for Herodias, his brother’s wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison” (Lk. 3:19-20). Remember that John’s ministry was to call everyone to repentance, and this included those in power. Luke did not go into as much detail as Matthew or Mark did regarding Herod’s transgressions, but apparently he took for himself Herodias as his wife, who was his brother Phillip’s wife before him (Matt. 14:3-4). That, along with “all the evil things that Herod had done,” was enough for John to call Herod to repent, and that led Herod to imprison John.

What About Now?

The major takeaway of John’s ministry is the profound importance of repentance. Without repentance, one cannot see the kingdom of God nor experience forgiveness of sin. It’s the crucial component to belief. It’s easier to say you believe in God and want to follow His ways; it’s much more challenging to forsake your own. This message permeated the apostles’ teachings as well. Peter, for example, famously said, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Without repentance, there is no salvation nor forgiveness. Baptism is the sign that outwardly expresses the inward change.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Luke 3:1-2. Write down the names and titles of each of the people Luke records here.

2. Read Luke 3:3-6. Where did John go and what did he proclaim? What verse did he quote here, and what is the significance of it? (Hint: See above notes)

Day Two

1. Read Luke 3:7-9. What is the key to salvation according to John? What do they Jews believe the key to salvation is? Why is that wrong, according to John?

2. Read Luke 3:10-14. What ways does John practically describe what repentance looks like?

Day Three

1. Read Luke 3:15-16. Who did the people think John was? What was his response to this? How does he describe Jesus? What is the significance of “the Holy Spirit and fire?” (Hint: See above notes)

2. Read Luke 3:17. How is Jesus described here and what will He do?

Day Four

1. Read Luke 3:18-20. What did John do that made Herod imprison him?

2. Read Acts 2:37-40. How does this verse reflect a continuation of John’s ministry and understanding of repentance and salvation?

Week 10 Discussion: Repentance and Baptism

John's ministry centered on "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Lk. 3:3). Repentance was the seminal component to everything John proclaimed, and remained such throughout Jesus' ministry and the apostolic age as well. Talk as a group about the importance of repentance, both in a "once for all" and also "daily" manner, and talk about how repentance interacts with the act of baptism.

1. Icebreaker: Have you ever verbally repented of your sin to God? To others? Why or why not?
2. Why is repentance an unpopular message?
3. Read 1 John 1:9. What is the overarching big idea of this verse?
4. Why is it sometimes necessary to rebuke a brother or sister in love? What does this need for rebuking indicate?
5. Have you ever been baptized? If not, why not? If so, did you fully understand what repentance means?
6. How can the church do a better job of helping people understand the need for repentance?

Takeaways:

1. John came proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.
2. John called everyone to repentance, including those in power, and Herod in particular did not like this and imprisoned him for it.