

We have been introduced to John the Baptist from earlier chapters. While Zechariah was ministering in the holy place the angel Gabriel's announced to him that he and his wife would have a son in their old age and to name him John. We read of the prophecy his father uttered when he named the child. We also learned that his name means God has been gracious. We read ⁸⁰ *And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.* Luke 1:80

¹ *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, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.* Luke 3:1-2 Luke is placing the ministry of John and Jesus in world history. It is an historical account, not a creation of one's imagination. It is difficult to say the exact date for numerous reasons. Tiberius Caesar became co-regent with Augustus in 11/12 A.D. Was that the beginning of his reign or was it when Augustus died, August 19, A.D. 14? Which of the numerous calendars in use at the time was he referring to? It was common at the time to count part of a year as a year. All of the others mentioned were in power in time spans that include both possibilities.ⁱ So we can narrow the date to somewhere between A.D. 26 to 29 when John began to preach.

"The Word of God came to" is a phrase applied to four Old Testament prophets (Jeremiah 1:2ⁱⁱ; Hosea 1:1ⁱⁱⁱ; Micah 1:1^{iv}; Haggai 1:1^v). Luke's language is telling us that John, son of Zechariah, is one of God's prophets. He was filled with the Spirit from the womb (1:15^{vi}), but his role as God's mouthpiece began when the Word of God came to him in the desert wilderness. This is mentioned to connect him with the prophecy of Isaiah which John proclaimed was about him. (See verses 3-5 quoting Isaiah 40:3-5.)

³ *And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.* Luke 3:3 John preached repentance - as did Jesus (Matthew 4:17^{vii}), and the early church (Acts 2:38^{viii}). John preached the good news (3:18^{ix}), that repentance leads to salvation, the forgiveness of sins. This prepared the people who truly repented to receive Jesus as the means by which forgiveness became possible (Acts 13:38^x).

The Greek word for repentance means to have a change of mind. Once we thought we could do things we knew were wrong but still escape the wrath of God. But then we changed our minds about the value of doing those things and realized we can't escape God's justice. Once we thought our sins were not a big deal to God. Then we came to see that **our rebellion was spiting in His face. Repentance is the brokenness we feel when we realize the disgusting nature of our sin**, how it harms us and others, and how abhorrent it is to God. It's like an addict waking up in the hospital and realizing that if he doesn't change his way of life, the addiction will kill him. When John would cry out to repent for the kingdom is at hand, it was like declaring the need to step out of darkness or stay in it forever.

Baptism was not the means of forgiveness, but rather a picture of coming out of one's old life into a new one. Baptism means nothing without repentance and faith. Josephus wrote that John's baptism required a "cleansed soul" (*Anitiquities* 18;5;2). The Essene's also saw the act of baptism as doing nothing in itself, but as an outward sign of an inward condition (1 QS 3:3-12).

⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "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 shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" Luke 3:4-6 John quoted Isaiah 40:3-5. It was the theme verse of the Qumran community (1 QS 8:12-15). They saw themselves as the fulfillment of that prophecy. The Qumran records mention one Yohanan that spent time with them. If it was the Baptist, perhaps his departure came when he realized the passage was personally about him. What a challenge that would be unless the revelation was so clear such as the expression in verse two, "the word of God came to" him. This would have confirmed what his father had taught him as a child that this was his mission, even perhaps telling him that his cousin, Jesus, was the Messiah.

Verses four and five from Isaiah would have been understood in that day as the preparation for the arrival of a king. Emissaries would precede the king and tell the people to prepare for his arrival. A major part of that work was to repair the roads. The land of Israel is much like our own in that flash floods wash out or bury sections of roads. Work crews would go out and repair the roads as a sign to the king that they welcomed him. John is that emissary declaring the King of kings is coming and hearts better get cleaned up for His arrival. Sin should be repented of and abandoned. Resistance to His Spirit must be forsaken. Hearts must change from stubbornness to welcoming His arrival.

When we look at Isaiah 40, we see the paragraph before addresses the forgiveness of sins (Isaiah 40:2^{xi}), and the ones after speak of the enduring Word of God. The passage commands Israel, "Behold your God!" Many who heard John's message would have thought of those verses that surrounded John's declaration of his mission. The enduring Word of God was coming with forgiveness for sins, and everyone would behold Him with their own eyes (Isaiah 40:9-10^{xii}; 52:8^{xiii}).

He's coming again! And whether we go to Him first or He arrives to receive His own, we better level the mountains and fill in the valleys of our hearts, repairing the road into our hearts from the floods of sin, for every eye shall see Him. All flesh shall see the salvation of God. That is His name, Yeshua, the salvation of God. Luke was quoting the Greek version of Isaiah, but **if we were to translate the Hebrew to English we would be saying everyone will see Jesus.**^{xiv} That agrees with John's statement in Revelation 1:7^{xv}. There he alludes to a passage we studied in Zechariah, "even those who pierced Him" (Zechariah 12:10^{xvi}). Zechariah adds what Jesus had warned of, the wailing that would fill the earth when mankind sees Him returning (Matthew 24:30^{xvii}). (Consider Amos 5:18-20.^{xviii})

It is not only the pagans that need contrite humility before a holy God, but the church as well. We can forget our first love (Revelation 2:4^{xix}). While we have the righteousness of God in Christ because of Jesus, our hearts can still slowly grow hardened if we do not stay sensitive to the conviction of the Holy Spirit. We can dig out valleys that were once filled making mountains in the process. We can allow self-centeredness to dull our ears to God's direction to serve others. We can dig a valley of materialism that keeps us from receiving God's prompting to give to a need. We can let apathy keep us from reaching out and speaking up when we have an opportunity to share Christ with those who are lost. And when we see what is happening in our hearts we need to repent again and come back to our first love (Revelation 1:5^{xx}).

⁷ He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Luke 3:7 John wasn't the kind of preacher that pleased the crowds. He told it like it was. He called them a bunch of baby snakes fleeing the inevitable, just wrath of God (Isaiah 30:27-28^{xxi}), which was a way of shocking them into the reality of their spiritual condition. Jesus used the same language (Matthew 12:34^{xxii}; 23:33^{xxiii}).

So, what kept them coming? It was the anointing of Elijah on him. They could sense the power that came with the words. We could use some John the Baptist style preaching again. I grew up under a slightly milder version of it, referred to as fire and brimstone preaching. The culture of the day became hardened toward it. But perhaps it should be brought back for a new generation, if it is proclaimed with the anointing of God that brings conviction, not just out of religious duty. That was the power in Billy Graham's preaching. We are sinners who have offended our holy Maker. We are destined to eternal punishment for our rebellion against Him. But God so loved the world He made a way for you to be forgiven and cleansed and destined for heaven (John 3:16^{xxiv}).

⁸ 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. Luke 3:8 John didn't leave it unexplained. He didn't preach cheap grace. You know, the kind that says, "I said the prayer and Jesus forgave me and now I can live as I please." No! He said your fruit (the way you live and the results of your life) better line up with your repentance (Luke 6:42-45^{xxv}). Don't think, as some rabbi taught, that because you are a descendant of Abraham you are in the clear. God can turn stones into children of Abraham. And in fact, that is what He did (Ezekiel 11:19^{xxvi}). He took hearts of stone and turned them into hearts of flesh, both Jewish and Gentile. Within John's message is the whole Gospel. *True repentance first produces the fruit of character: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23^{xxvii}). Then it produces the fruit of action.*^{xxviii}

⁹ 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." Luke 3:9 Judgment isn't some far off distant day. It is at the door even now. Within a generation the temple was gone. The rulers were all dead. Many who heard John's message would have died or would

die in Titus' siege on Jerusalem. The Christians fled because of Jesus' prophetic warning (Luke 21:21^{xxxix}). God's axe of judgment cut the very root of the tree of religious Judaism that rejected Jesus as the Messiah. They sprang up again but in a different form where good works and prayer were said to replace the sacrifices. But how can one declare the Torah to be the Word of God and say it no longer means what it once did?

People can take on a religious outward appearance and language without having fruit in their heart or their hidden life. They associate with believers and act very religious and dedicated because they desire respect and praise of man. But inwardly the sap of the Spirit does not flow (John 15:6^{xxx}). Their life is about self, not Jesus. The warning to bring them out of this spiritual stupor is that the axe is ready to strike their roots. Only when we are in the vine will the sap of the Spirit flow and produce fruit (John 15:5^{xxxi})!

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" Luke 3:10 Those who were convicted by the John's message wanted to know what good fruit looked like. They wanted to know if their repentance was genuine. This is most often the cry of a heart that wants to be right with God, but sometimes it comes from a desire to do enough good works to be accepted by God while compromising with the world. Such was the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:20-22^{xxxii}).

¹¹ And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." Luke 3:11 Faith pleases God (Hebrews 11:6^{xxxiii}). No amount of good works will earn us God's favor. But if we have repented and come to a saving faith of trusting the Lord Jesus, our lives will express God's concerns. John's examples are expressions of loving concern for our fellow man in need. The first example was clothing and food. If you have extra, then give to those who don't have the necessities of life. While that need is rare in our community, we can give financially to the benevolent fund or to Christian ministries that help the needy like Samaritans Purse. This is why we participate in the shoebox ministry and generously support the local homeless missions.

¹² 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 you are authorized to do."*

¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." Luke 3:12-14 The tax collectors were told to not take advantage of their positions and authority by only collecting what they were authorized to collect. They often became wealthy by collecting more than they were supposed to, and they had the military to enforce their decisions. While many in Israel rejected the right of Rome to collect any tax, John just told them to do their job honestly. The same principle applied to soldiers. They had authority but were told not to abuse that authority for personal gain, but rather to be content with their wages. That applies to all work. We should charge only what is fair. Nothing should be done out of greed if our heart is right with God. All we do should be done to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31^{xxxiv}).

When talking about the fruit of repentance we should always be careful to note that unrepentant, prideful religious people love to boast about good works. When the Jews' temple was destroyed, the rabbis continued to reject Jesus and substituted good works for faith. The liberal churches that reject the Word of God and the cross are some of the most prolific in giving to charitable causes, as long as those works don't stand for truth of Scripture. They boast in how much they give, and their churches are full of wealthy people who feel they are good enough because they give to those causes. **Good works are often a substitute for faith** in the One who should be Lord over all our possessions and time. Satan's trick is to encourage us to give to good causes, thereby feeling good about ourselves while remaining in control of our lives. Then we feel no need to repent. We don't have to give the reigns of our lives to God. We can boast in what we do, and when we die, we can go straight to hell where we remain unsubmitted to the Lordship of Jesus.

15 As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, Luke 3:15 This is an indicator that the Jews of that day were waiting and watching for the coming of the Messiah. Their idea of this One to come was mixed with passages regarding the first and second coming, but they could not have known that at the time. They should have known John couldn't be the one for he was from the lineage of Levi. However, having been filled with the Spirit from the womb of Elizabeth, having spent decades of preparation in the wilderness, and suddenly declaring in the power of the Spirit that the judgment of God was about to fall, it is no wonder that they questioned whether he was the one.

I am going to stop at this point and save the baptism of Jesus for the next Sunday. I want you to leave considering what the people would have felt when they heard John's booming voice tell them to repent and prepare their hearts for the coming kingdom. It had been 400 years without a prophetic voice. A common expression before John was, "There was no voice nor any who answered." Finally, the Word was spoken again. We need to always check to see that our hearts are ready to receive the King, receive His instructions and directions, His rebuke and His love. If we are not yielding to the King's commands, can we truly say we are a part of His Kingdom? The mountains and valleys in our hearts are the areas in which we do not readily yield to Him. They are the little gods, and we are to have no other gods (Exodus 20:3^{xxxv}). Fill up the valleys and level the mountains and receive the word of the Lord. Then you will see the glory of God!

Questions

- 1 What do we know about John the Baptist?
- 2 What was the purpose of his baptism?
- 3 What was his main message?
- 4 What precedes and follows the Isaiah quote?
- 5 What was John's style?
- 6 How did he contradict accepted thought?
- 7 How can we know repentance is genuine?
- 8 What was his warning?
- 9 What was the practical application for them? and us?

10 How do we know they were in expectation of the Messiah?

11 What is God calling you to do about this message?

ⁱ Pilate was governor from A.D. 26-36, and Herod was tetrarch from 4 B.C. to A.D. 39.

ⁱⁱ **Jeremiah 1:2 (ESV)**

² to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign.

ⁱⁱⁱ **Hosea 1:1 (ESV)**

¹ The word of the LORD that came to Hosea, the son of Beeri, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel.

^{iv} **Micah 1:1 (ESV)**

¹ The word of the LORD that came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem.

^v **Haggai 1:1 (ESV)**

¹ In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest:

^{vi} **Luke 1:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.

^{vii} **Matthew 4:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

^{viii} **Acts 2:38 (ESV)**

³⁸ And Peter said to them, "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.

^{ix} **Luke 3:18 (ESV)**

¹⁸ So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.

^x **Acts 13:38 (ESV)**

³⁸ Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you,

^{xi} **Isaiah 40:2 (ESV)**

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

^{xii} **Isaiah 40:8-10 (ESV)**

⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. ⁹ Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"

¹⁰ Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

^{xiii} **Isaiah 52:8 (ESV)**

⁸ The voice of your watchmen—they lift up their voice; together they sing for joy; for eye to eye they see the return of the LORD to Zion.

^{xiv} Ares rau yesuat nu elohe

^{xv} **Revelation 1:7 (ESV)**

⁷ Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

^{xvi} **Zechariah 12:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.

^{xvii} **Matthew 24:30 (ESV)**

³⁰ Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

^{xviii} **Amos 5:18-20 (ESV)**

¹⁸ Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! Why would you have the day of the LORD? It is darkness, and not light, ¹⁹ as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and

leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him.²⁰ Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?

^{xix} **Revelation 2:4 (ESV)**

⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

^{xx} **Revelation 2:5 (ESV)**

⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

^{xxi} **Isaiah 30:27-28 (ESV)**

²⁷ Behold, the name of the LORD comes from afar, burning with his anger, and in thick rising smoke; his lips are full of fury, and his tongue is like a devouring fire;²⁸ his breath is like an overflowing stream that reaches up to the neck; to sift the nations with the sieve of destruction, and to place on the jaws of the peoples a bridle that leads astray.

^{xxii} **Matthew 12:34 (ESV)**

³⁴ You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

^{xxiii} **Matthew 23:33 (ESV)**

³³ You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?

^{xxiv} **John 3:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

^{xxv} **Luke 6:42-45 (ESV)**

⁴² How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye.⁴³ "For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit,⁴⁴ for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush.

⁴⁵ The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.

^{xxvi} **Ezekiel 11:19 (ESV)**

¹⁹ And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh,

^{xxvii} **Galatians 5:22-23 (ESV)**

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

^{xxviii} Hughes, Kent- Preaching the Word – Luke, Volume I: That You May Know the Truth.

^{xxix} **Luke 21:21 (ESV)**

²¹ Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it,

^{xxx} **John 15:6 (ESV)**

⁶ If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

^{xxxi} **John 15:5 (ESV)**

⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

^{xxxii} **Matthew 19:20-22 (ESV)**

²⁰ The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?"²¹ Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."²² When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

^{xxxiii} **Hebrews 11:6 (ESV)**

⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

^{xxxiv} **1 Corinthians 10:31 (ESV)**

³¹ So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

^{xxxv} **Exodus 20:3 (ESV)**

³ "You shall have no other gods before me.