



The Ministry of John the Baptist

Luke 3:1-4:13

I. Christ's Ministry Prepared by the Forerunner (Luke 3:1-20)

A. Political Circumstances of John's Day (Luke 3:1)

Jesus Himself said, "*Among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist*" (Matthew 11:11). Luke was careful to indicate the time when John began his ministry, that is, when "*the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness.*" Luke's detailing who the rulers were during the period in which John the Baptist lived and preached enables us to identify the historical period of John's day, and thereby to understand the conditions which existed during that time. Here also at the beginning of John's ministry is a description of the type of life he led.

What was the world like in John's day? From history we learn that it was corrupt. The reign of Augustus marked not only the crisis of Roman history, but also the climax. In politics, philosophy, religion and society, the limit had been reached. One man seemed to rule the world. Under him was an army of 340,000 men. He headed the senate. He was high priest of religion. Luxury and misery were side by side in imperial Rome. Stoicism, which flattered its pride, and epicureanism, which gratified its sensuality, were ruling forms of thought. "*If there is no life beyond death, why not indulge the passions*" was the philosophy. Religion was at a low ebb. The only religion insisted on by the Roman State was the worship of the emperor. Conscience towards decency did not exist. Marriage became rare, abortion common. Sick and old slaves were cast aside to die. There were no hospitals, and suicide was the only escape for those tired of life. To such a world John was commissioned to proclaim "*the kingdom of God.*"

B. John, the "Messenger" or "Forerunner" of Christ (Luke 3:2)

John the Baptist, the son of a priest, had likely been educated and then had gone early into a life of seclusion. In the desert he enjoyed the fellowship with God which prepared him for his great but brief ministry. He had been filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. John, "the messenger," who went before the face of Christ that he might make ready the way of the Lord was prepared to be "the voice" announcing the coming of the King. It is little wonder that the Nazarite-living John, the prophet of the desert, attracted the crowds to his ministry.

"*The word of God came to John.*" This important statement shows that John did not run before he was sent. God had a right time for him to come forth with a message. In the wilderness John was just a man, but when the word of God came to this same John, it kindled him, and he became a true minister charged with a message from heaven. The beginning verses of this chapter give a list of government personalities. The world has its long list of people and authorities with which it is most impressed. On the other hand, there are names which bear upon the spiritual life and work which, when all told, will surpass the pomp of royalty. Because the word of God came to him and because he dared to speak the word of God to others, John will be remembered above the flow of political figures.

C. The Message John Preached (Luke 3:3-6)

The message John preached was of divine origin. It comes to us by the grace of God and is just as relevant for us today as it was when it was first given.

The Jews of John's day were very religious in that they were careful to perform their religious rituals. However, their religion had become a religion of works, not of the heart. They were expecting a Messiah who would come and restore them to the place of political power which they felt they so rightly deserved. John came to prepare the way, the people's hearts, for the promised Messiah, not the expected Messiah. Therefore, John's message was one of repentance and a change in behavior due to a repentant heart. The message John preached was a stern one, dauntless and very practical.

Having nothing to hope for from man's favor, he had nothing to fear from their dislike. His first message was "Repent" and his second message was "*The kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" He told the multitudes more about their religion than they ever knew before. He shook off the shams of religion. He put himself within the reach of living people, for he did not live above their level of existence. He exposed and shredded the veils, tinsel and mockery of an outward show, and tore up the traditions of the Pharisees. John preached a repentance with hope.

D. John Preaches to the Multitude (Luke 3:7)

Matthew 3:5 tells us that "*Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan*" went out to hear him and "*were baptized of him.*" John's baptism was a ceremonial washing which was an expression or a profession of repentance. Baptism today symbolizes the inner spiritual life and is the testimony to the world that we publicly give testimony of this.

"*Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*" Probably John was thinking of the deceitfulness and malignity, the deadly poison of the spirit, of those who came to him. John did not use smooth words to express his message of terror. It was a serious moment in Israel's history. The forerunner of Christ was indignant when he saw the people seeking baptism as another ritual. Instead of seeking another outward sign of religiosity, which might lead them to feel they could evade their duty, they should have repented. Reference to "*the wrath to come*" is frequently made in Scripture and indicates the justice of God upon the sin and the sinner. God warns us that sin will be judged and punished.

E. John Admonishes "Bring Forth Fruits." (Luke 3:8)

When we see those who profess to be Christians without the practice of godliness, we conclude that the life of Christ is not in them. The true Christian is like a living tree; the longer he or she continues rooted in Christ, the more abundant he or she is in living for Christ and the work of Christ. The Christian life needs to know the balance of both devotion and works of faith. Too often Christians remain in blossom and flowers, which represent devotion, without ever being fruitful. They fail to develop into fruit-bearing Christians. Then too, remember that our conduct should not be contrary to the name of Christ which we bear as Christians. If you call yourself Christian, live worthy of that title.

John impressed on his listeners that their lives were to show forth the results of the change that had taken place within them. As any tree is known by its fruits, so the life is known by the deeds. The Jews counted on their relationship to Abraham for their security. John told them that they were basing their faith upon the wrong foundation.

As we know, the Jews have been scattered throughout the world, wandering in blindness and unbelief, for nearly two thousand years, while the Gentiles have been experiencing their day of grace. In the day in which we live, we have had the privilege of seeing the Jews, at least in part, return to their land. The Scriptures teach that this would happen "*when the day of the Gentile*" ended. Luke 21:24 reads "*And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.*" How sensitive we are to the fact that it is very probable we are in that period of time (since June of 1967), the closing events of history according to the Word of God. It is not a matter of taking a political position or a radical point of view with respect to the Bible. The facts of past days are with us and people are having to reckon with what God has said in His Word would come in the last days. We too need to be examining our faith toward God to see if our trust, the basis of our faith, has been in some form of religion, or church activity, or Christian parents. Have you been basing your faith upon the wrong foundation?

F. John Warns of Destruction (Luke 3:9)

“*And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees.*” A warning of grace was given to the Jewish nation, but the history of their captivity teaches us a time does come when doom is certain. May we not carelessly consider the opportunities of the day of God’s grace given to us as individuals and as a nation. In the natural, it would seem almost too late for us, but God’s call is still going forth. Let us be knowledgeable of the Word that sounds forth in II Chronicles 7:14, “*if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.*” Let us embrace this opportunity today. “*Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*” The character of an individual life, or a nation’s life, indicates the destiny of that person or people. Only a radical change of life through the new birth and the infilling of the Holy Spirit will warrant our being spared the wrath of the Judge of all the earth. It is a false assumption to think we can ignore or avoid this principle set forth in God’s Word.

G. Response of the Crowd (Luke 3:10-14)

“*What shall we do?*” His message had such an effect upon his hearers that they were eager to do whatever was necessary to keep them from ever being hewn down and cast into the fire. John’s response was that their repentance should bear the fruit of unselfishness, acts of caring for others. They should share what they had with those less fortunate than themselves. Even though a man was so poor as to just have two coats, he could share one and still have one left.

Under the Roman government, the tax collectors leased out the collection of its taxes to speculators who in turn loaned their work to subordinate collectors. It was commonly known that the tax collectors gained extra income by frequently defrauding the people because the system, as set up, accommodated this unethical practice and “everyone did it.” John said, “*Collect no more than what is appointed for you.*” Each publican was supposed to supply simply what justice required, regardless of

what the other collectors were doing. This reformation in the conduct of one who desired to be righteous would naturally bring upon them the hatred of the other cheaters. When one begins to do right, he is apt to be severely criticized by those who continue in wrong doing.

The soldiers were armed policemen who had opportunity to rob and do violence to the people. They were told to accuse no man falsely. They were exhorted to be content with their wages and not to try and get anything in an unjust way.

They were all expected to live justly in the world. This is also expected of us today.

H. Reaction to Admonition (Luke 3:15)

John’s message was radically different than anything they had heard from their religious leaders. “*Now as the people were in expectation, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ. . .*” Their silence showed that the admonition and counsel was not trivial. We would say, “It hit the nail on the head.” It found the root of their problem. They recognized, and we will too, that the Christian life is not made up of so-called great things, but rather has to do with the everyday, the ordinary. Our daily walk and conversation should habitually put into effect what we profess to know and believe. John’s answer to their question, “*What shall we do?*” involves living principles for all time.

I. John Qualifies His Ministry and Makes an Announcement (Luke 3:16-17)

“*I indeed baptize you with water.*” John could perform the outward ceremony. This is all any minister of religion can do. Then John announced that “*One mightier*” would come. How great must have been the estimate of Jesus in the heart and mind of John. Jesus, the “*One Mightier,*” would baptize with the Holy Ghost and fire. Fire is symbolic of the Holy Spirit in that it purifies the dross from human nature and brings warmth to the gospel. John’s baptism was the symbol of another and no less significant fact: Those baptized were not simply the penitent, but the expectant — men consecrated to a great hope.

Just as the thresher would see to it that the chaff was separated from the wheat so that nothing but the pure grain would remain, Christ would likewise be thorough in His dealings with men (Luke 3:17). John's message, announcing the characteristics of the revolution which Christianity would bring about, was clear and forceful as he talked about the fan, the chaff, the wheat, the garner, the purging and the fire. He not only gave expression to Christ's immediate work of baptism with the Holy Ghost and with fire, but indicated also the ultimate judgment of the end time (when there is no longer opportunity to act in faith upon the work and word of Christ). The end time will bring a time when the wheat will be separated from the chaff and there will be the final judgment on those who have not received Christ. Christ came to bring salvation to all, but we have a free will, a choice. We either choose to receive God's gift of salvation and His grace or reject it. For those who reject God's means of grace, there is judgment. The decision is your part. Have you made the choice?

J. John Shut Up in Prison (Luke 3:19-20)

In these verses we see power without principle in the character of Herod Antipas. Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, was tetrarch of Galilee of Peraea. Herod Antipas had married the daughter of Aretas, a famous Arabian King, whose territory was next to his own. However, when he was at Rome, he stayed at the house of his half-brother Philip and desired to have Philip's wife, Herodias. Herod Antipas made known his desire and Herodias consented to leave Philip and go with Herod, the man with much greater political power.

The daughter of Aretas was divorced, and Herodias took her place as the wife of Antipas. John the Baptist had the courage to denounce this marriage. Herod Antipas, under the pretense that he feared John's popularity with the multitude might lead to disturbances, had him put in prison. John was sent to Machaerus on the eastern side of the Dead Sea where Herod had a fortress and a city. It was here that Salome, the daughter of Herodias, danced before Antipas and won for her infamous mother the head of John the Baptist.

John's ministry was short and could seem to some to have been a failure. Not at all, it was victo-

ry. John's disciples went into the service of Christ. He preached a God-given message that laid a foundation upon which others built. This foundation he laid in struggle and martyrdom. Work done honestly for Christ can never be a failure. Remember the bridge which we tread upon in Christendom is built upon a bridge of martyrs. The suffering was theirs — the victory ours.

It is interesting to note: The first Elijah reproved King Ahab for the murder of Naboth and the seizure of his vineyard. John the Baptist, whom Christ said had come in the spirit and power of Elijah, was also bold in denouncing King Herod for his lust.

II. The Baptism of Jesus

(Luke 3:21-22, 23) See Map in Appendix

There are many theories given as to why Jesus was baptized: that He did it to identify completely with the people; His not being baptized would have been misunderstood by the people, He was taking on the responsibility for human sin; His baptism was a dedication to His Father's call which could only end in His crucifixion. Regardless of what discussion we may get into as to the reason, the result was that a new conception of Messianic consciousness dawned on Him. He did what He knew was God's will for Him (Hebrews 10:7) and heaven spoke its approval.

III. The Temptation in the Wilderness (Luke 4:1-13)

The temptation of Jesus was analogous to that of Eve in the garden of Eden. In I John 2:16 we read, *"For all that is in the world; the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life; is not of the Father but is of the world."* The appeal was made to physical desire, covetousness and pride. The subtlety was to misuse God's words to throw one off guard and then to promote doubt. Eve yielded to the tempter in Eden and the first Adam took of the forbidden fruit and ate. It is a matter of glorious history that the second Adam resisted the temptation. Theologians have discussed the inability of Christ to sin. Of course, one would wonder why Satan would bother to tempt Jesus if He was incapable of sinning. And, if incapable of sinning, there would be no temptation. The question is, could He have sinned or not? Leaving this question to be target for those who would spend their time discussing it, we praise God

that the divine human Saviour never sinned. He manifested to all men that He is a sufficient Saviour from sin because He himself, though in human form, passed through these great temptations without sin. It is our great privilege to have Christ so formed in us that we may constantly claim Him as the victorious One in our lives when we are tempted.

Jesus, in defense of that which was right throughout His temptation by Satan, used the Word of God as an instrument. How much more should we depend upon the sure Word of prophecy as our weapon of defense. The three temptations of Jesus were: (1) the temptation to physical appetite (Luke 4:2-4), (2) the temptation to covetousness (Luke 4:5-8) and (3) the temptation to pride (Luke 4:9-12).

Luke 4:13 says, "*Now when the devil had ended every temptation, . . .*" (when he had used all his tactics on the Son of God and had failed), "*He departed from Him until an opportune time.*" Satan did not leave Jesus in utter defeat, never to be heard from again. He met Him again in Gethsemane. If a believer has had a great victory, he must not conclude that he will never again be tempted or tested. Satan will come in different guises and on different occasions.

Daily Bible Study Questions for Group Discussion

Note: Read notes and Scripture references before answering the questions. Some questions are for those more advanced in Bible study. Try to answer all questions but don't be discouraged if some seem a little hard. Unless otherwise instructed, use Bible only in answering questions.

FIRST DAY: Read notes on lesson 3.

1. From your notes, give several facts concerning the political circumstances of John's day.
2. What made John's message so important?
3. What social classification would be given to John should he appear among us today?
4. What lessons can we learn from John's message to the three classes of people, which he gave in answer to their questions?

SECOND DAY: Read Luke 4:14-44.

5. (a) From **Luke 4**, what claims did Jesus make as he began His ministry?

(b) Where did He choose to make this declaration?
6. What did Jesus say to the people that made them so angry they expelled Him physically from the city?
7. (a) Contrast and discuss the reception of Jesus at Nazareth and then at Capernaum.

14. In **Luke 5:33**, the scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus a question. What did Jesus teach them in responding to their question?
15. There are three brief parables in **Luke 5:36-39**. (**Through these parables, Jesus was teaching principles about the new revelation He brought.**) Three questions are raised in these parables. Tell how they are answered and give reference from the parables.
- (1) Can the new revelation of Jesus Christ be combined with the old?
 - (2) To what kind of men can the new be entrusted?
 - (3) When men hear the new, what will be the reaction of those who are accustomed to the old?

FIFTH & SIXTH DAYS: Read Luke 6.

16. What principle did Jesus teach when He perceived the Pharisees were trying to find an accusation against Him for doing good on the Sabbath?
17. What special action did Jesus take when he saw that His popularity with the people was increasing and the hostility of the religious leaders was growing more intense?
18. (a) Give the verses from **chapter 6 of Luke** that list the principles of the new society of the kingdom of God.

(b) What is the basic principle and how does it manifest itself?

(c) Is this according to the ordinary standards of men?

19. In the parable in **Luke 6:39-45**, what is taught we are to avoid if we are to be guides to others?

20. When the tests of life come, what is the important factor that will enable us to stand?

Notes