

Before You Get the Gospel, Part 1

Luke 3:1-3

Follow along with me as I read verses 1 to 23 of Luke Chapter 3. "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being the tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, 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. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "The voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled in, and every mountain and hill made low. And crooked shall become straight, the rough places shall become level ways. And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'

“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? 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 ax 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.’ And the crowds began to ask him, ‘What then should we do?’

“And he answered them, ‘Whoever has two tunics should share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.’ Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, ‘Teacher, what shall we do?’ And he said to them, ‘Collect no more than you are authorized to do.’ 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.’ As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, ‘I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the

strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

“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.’ And with so many other exhortations he preached the good news to the people. But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him 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. Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.’ Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age.”

Have you ever stopped to wonder why Luke spends so much time introducing us to John? I mean he’s almost had an equal amount of airplay as the Lord Jesus himself. Luke opens this massive Gospel with the visit of Gabriel to announce the birth, a remarkable birth, but not of Jesus first. He announces the

birth of John first, and then of Jesus. Two baby announcements: John first, then Jesus. After that, two birth narratives: John's and then Jesus'. Even the prophetic songs that follow, they give an amazing degree of attention to someone other than Jesus Christ, who is the Son of the Most High. We are supposed to focus not first on Jesus, but on the forerunner, on a herald, who runs before the king with a message. Why? What makes him so special? All the four Gospel writers begin the story of the Gospel with John the Baptist. It's as if, before they can talk about Jesus, they need to introduce John. All four quote Isaiah 40, verse 3, "The voice of the one crying in the wilderness," and they identify John as that voice. All four focus on his work of baptism. And, yet they all record John acknowledging the superiority of Jesus, of his ministry, the baptism that he will bring. In fact all, in all of the four Gospel accounts, the focus on John's ministry and John's life ends as soon as John baptizes Jesus. That's the point of handoff. That's the turning point. It's the pinnacle, actually, of John's career: identifying Jesus, pointing people to him, thereby launching Jesus' ministry.

Just a note on that, it's instructive for us, isn't it? The highest aspiration of our lives, the most we can ever aspire to

is to point others to Jesus Christ. And we are not, as much as I love you, beloved, we are not as remarkable as John the Baptist. This man was known throughout not just this region, but the entire world. You know in Ephesus, Asia Minor, modern Turkey, they ran into disciples of John the Baptist there. That says something about his renown. And as great as he was, as great as a man as he was, as impressive as his personality was, his highest purpose and aspiration was to point not to himself, not to get fans and followers on Facebook, but to point people to Jesus Christ. That's instructive for us.

But, again, the Gospels do emphasize John, do they not? And we need to consider, why did all four Gospel writers enter into the ministry of Jesus that way? First by highlighting John's ministry. Why did God send John first? Why did God plan to have it happen that way? What made John's ministry such a necessary part of the redemptive plan? Many treat John as simply the warm-up act. It's as if he's some kind of a public spectacle, sent out to get everybody's attention, just to wake everybody up. He was that, to be sure, but there's a deeper reason. And that's clear when you consider Luke's account because of all the Gospel writers, Luke spends the most time developing the ministry and

the person of John the Baptist. Luke's Gospel has the longest treatment of John by a wide margin. In fact, Luke's treatment of John is longer still if you include the infancy narratives. Even longer still if you include the prophecy of John's father, Zechariah. Again, why? Why all this emphasis on John the Baptist? Wouldn't it be enough just to focus on Jesus, just to put our attention on him? What makes John so necessary?

Well, I'm going to make what may seem at first like an audacious statement to you, but it is the Gospel truth. The ministry of John the Baptist was essential to the ministry of Jesus Christ. Without John's ministry, we wouldn't have Jesus' ministry. If we don't get his message, we don't get the Gospel message either. In fact I'll tell you, folks, without any fear of contradiction, the message of John the Baptist, that is the message that has been missing from most of the Gospel presentations in this country over the past 50 years or more. Evangelicalism has been deprived of this crucial element of the Gospel for far too long, and we are the worse for it, let me tell you. Why is it that so many in this country claim to be evangelical, they claim to profess faith in Jesus Christ, and yet they cling to the most abhorrent sins? Why do they excuse

their sins? Why, when evangelicalism has been so prominent in public life over the past 50 years, why are evangelicals known for their political views and not for their holiness? Their separation from sin? Why are so many of their churches caught mimicking the world, trying to attract followers and fans by chasing cultural relevance? It's because they have failed to preach what John the Baptist preached as part and parcel to the Gospel message. It's because they have forsaken the bold call for sinners to repent of their sins.

Look at Luke 3:3, "John went into all the region around the Jordan proclaiming" what? He was proclaiming, he was preaching, "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Now, let your eyes scroll down to verse 18 and notice what it says. So with many other exhortations. He preached" what? "good news to the people." The verb translated there, "he preached good news," you know what that verb is? It's *euangelizo*, which means, you guessed it, to preach the Gospel. That's where we get the name by which we are known, we are evangelicals because we *euangelizo*, we preach the Gospel. Folks, this is absolutely critical. If you don't get the concept of repentance, guess what? You don't get the Gospel either. So many pastors today are

preaching a partial Gospel devoid of demands, devoid of hard truths. They back off of all that and soft-peddle partial truths to a self-indulgent culture. They're avoiding the hard sayings of Jesus, and they're staying far, far away, let me tell you, from any association with John the Baptist. He's a hard guy. He's a tough guy with tough words. "Brood of vipers." That is tough. Modern pastors offer people freedom, but it's not the freedom that comes from forsaking their sins. They offer people joy, happiness, fulfillment, but it's not the joy of a holy life. They offer the benefits of the Gospel that can be enjoyed apart from the demands of the Gospel.

Folks, that is no gospel at all. I don't want to hear anything except, You can be free from your sins. Because for us who know the Gospel, we want deliverance. We want to be separated from sin and Satan and the world. And we want holiness; the holiness of our God is what we are after. Apart from what John taught, which by the way is what Jesus taught as well, apart from his message of repentance, you know what? There is no Gospel. John and Jesus preached the same thing, repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And as I said, many professing evangelicals, they deny that the doctrine of repentance has



anything to do with their salvation at all. Their lives show it, too. If you listen to them explain how they came to Christ, their language is devoid of any understanding of repentance. They'll say, I've asked Jesus into my heart, or, I've accepted Jesus as my Savior. Yeah, I just have a question to you, do you bow before him as your Lord? Because that's what he is. That's great you accept Jesus, but the crucial question is this: Does Jesus accept you? Your approval of Jesus is not the issue. His approval of you that's the issue of real eternal significance. The only people he approves are the humble and the meek. They are the repentant, the penitent. Humble repentance from sin is the entrance into the Gospel.

In fact, in Matthew's Gospel, the command, repent, is basically a summary call to salvation. John the Baptist comes in Matthew 3:2 saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." And then in Matthew 4:17, Jesus came, and you know what he said? Exactly the same thing, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Repentance is the bottom line when we call people to embrace Jesus Christ by faith. So it's no wonder so many evangelical churches have become impotent, powerless, almost indistinguishable from the world. They've ignored this

crucial element of Gospel proclamation. And because of that, beloved, they're not faithful. If someone does not repent of his sins, that person is not a Christian. We must insist upon this because the truth of the Gospel, the glory of God, the eternal salvation of sinners, it all depends on proclaiming repentance as an essential, indispensable part of the Gospel message.

So we're going to examine this issue of repentance. It's a concept that we so desperately need to recover in our time, and let me tell you, to recover in this region. I don't know how many people I have met who say they believe in Jesus Christ, but they have not repented. They don't even know what your talking about. Without repentance, not only do people remain trapped in their sins, but the glory of Jesus Christ in his Gospel is besmirched by the lack of holiness among those who falsely claim to know him. Before you get to the Gospel, you need to get to repentance. Before you can comprehend and embrace the Gospel, you need to comprehend the demands of the Gospel, what the Gospel requires. How are we going to count the cost if we don't lay before people the cost? Jesus came to save sinners. That is, those who know that they are sinners, those who want to repent

of their sin so they might truly embrace what he offers, which is forgiveness and rescue from divine wrath.

So let's get started in this understanding of this monumental doctrine of repentance, which is introduced here in the ministry of John the Baptist. We're going to start with the first point: The Prepared Preacher of Repentance. The Prepared Preacher of Repentance. Take a look at verses 2 and 3. "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. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness.'" Who is John? What is the best way to describe him? He has no imperial significance, like Tiberius Caesar or Pontius Pilate. He doesn't even have regional power or authority like the tetrarchs or the high priests. John is simply a wilderness voice. John 1:19 and following says, "When the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' [...] 'What do you say about yourself?'" You know what he said? "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." That was John's own testimony about

himself, which is why all four Gospel writers record the same thing about him, making the connection he intended for them to make; back to Isaiah, Chapter 40, verse 3.

Where did John get this notion about himself? Look back really quick at Luke 1:76 and following, the prophet song of John's father Zechariah. Luke 1:76, What did he say? He said this, "and you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins." Where did Zechariah get that idea? Well, from the Holy Spirit who had filled him to say those exact words in Luke 1:67, but that corresponded perfectly with what Gabriel had revealed even before John had been conceived. Look back at Luke 1:16 and 17. Luke 1:16 and 17, says this, John "will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him," that is the Lord their God, "he'll go before them in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." How does the Bible describe people before salvation? It describes them as disobedient, and when they become Christians, what do they need

to do? They need to turn and submit themselves to the wisdom of the just. People don't want to do that, folks. They don't want to submit to anybody.

Go ahead and back to Luke Chapter 3. A prepared prophet creates a prepared people, ready for the Lord, ready for his ministry, and that's why I said, folks, at the beginning, that without John's ministry, we wouldn't have Jesus' ministry. If we don't get his message, we don't get the Gospel message either. Before you get the Gospel, you need to get the message of repentance because it's integral to the Gospel itself. Notice here, Luke 3, John is a wilderness voice. Twice Luke mentions John's emergence from the desert, but unlike Matthew and Mark, he doesn't tell us anything about his attire, his wardrobe. He doesn't say anything about his diet. For Matthew and Mark, those details were important. They were writing to Jewish audience and they were important, those details, because they connected John to the prophet Elijah. But Luke, he wants Theophilus and all of his Gentile readers, and that's all of us, he wants us to see something else about John. He doesn't want us to get lost in those details. He wants us to focus on this detail. As we mentioned earlier, John was, according to Luke 1:80, he was in

the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel. That day's come. John has emerged from the wilderness. And you can imagine him like leathery lizard crawling out of the rocks and crags. He's coming out of the wadis and the ravines. He's still got locusts between his teeth.

What is the significance of him emerging from the wilderness? What is the significance of that to the people that he is speaking to? Well, first of all, John is clearly not part of the system. He's not a member of the establishment. That's apparent just by looking at him. He held no political post. He held no ecclesiastical authority, so you know what? That means he's got no interest to protect. He's got no salary, he's got no ulterior motives, no designs. He's got no system to perpetuate, no allegiances to maintain, no loyalties to uphold. He speaks for God and God alone. Why? Because his loyalty and his allegiance are to God and to God alone.

Secondly, coming up out of the desert where he lived the majority of his growing up years, John is unencumbered by the things that the rest of us are encumbered by, that is, commitments to people. John is uninfluenced by human

relationships. John has not been tainted by rubbing shoulders with sinful humanity, and he's not been affected, really, by the rest of humanity for that matter. So he couldn't care less what people think about him. You can count on him not to be a man-pleaser. You can count on him to tell the unvarnished truth, to speak without apology, with deference to no one. All this means that John is a trustworthy voice. You believe what he says. And that's really an interesting part of his own self-awareness, his own self-understanding. He represented himself in John 1:23 that I read earlier not as, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, but simply as "a voice crying out in the wilderness." There's no definite article there. He didn't say, I'm the voice. He said, "I am a voice." It's not that he thinks of himself as one among many, just many to listen to, but rather he pretty much thinks nothing of himself at all. He is a voice. And that's it. The emphasis, then, is not on him; it's on the message himself. He simply is the conduit of divine communication. He's the mouthpiece of God. No one cares about the bullhorn. They care what's coming out. No one gets caught up in the microphone, the amplifier, the speakers. What matters is what's coming out, what's produced. And in John's case, the one who is projecting the sound is God.